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ANC

IMAGINATION

STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

FLIGHT PERILOUS

by Ray C. Noll



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STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

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Introducing the

AUTHOR



Ray C. Noll



THERE'S never any hesitation on my part to relate the singleness of purpose which has characterized my life up to this time.

At age nine I wrote in a diary that I wanted to be when I grew up a "wrighter." From then until now I really worked on this goal.

Ground through the school system of Los Angeles, where I was born, I emerged from high school having prepared to be a teacher, musician, forester. Consequently, I went to work as a grocery clerk and factory assembler.

Tiring of spending money, I made elaborate preparations for college because I wanted to be a teacher or musician. (I had eliminated forester at that time.) When it came the day to enroll, I

enlisted in the U. S. Army and trained as an anti-aircraft battalion meteorologist. As an enlistment enticement I was allowed to choose AA because I liked staying in one place and not traveling. The battalion to which I was attached promptly toured the Mojave Desert, and then parts of Australia, New Guinea, the Philippines and Japan.

With my army background of meteorology, I re-entered college after the war with majors of English and music. (Somewhere along the way I eliminated teaching.) But after a semester at the University of Southern California's music classes, I dropped that, too.

This left me with English as a goal. Having somewhere in the hassle acquired a wife, I was warned

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The Editorial

EARLY in 1953 we had an interesting and somewhat lengthy conversation with F. Wagner Schlesinger, director of Chicago's Adler Planetarium. We reported on this conversation (somewhat obliquely) in our editorial for the July 1953 issue of *IMAGINATION*.

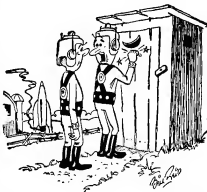
BRIEFLY, it was astronomer Schlesinger's view that space flight was not only highly improbable, but practically impossible. He offered several technical reasons to support his opinion. In reporting his views in our editorial we left his name secret. We had a hunch he would change his opinion before too long.

ACTUALLY, it took nearly two years. In the January 16th edition (this year) of the *Chicago American* newspaper, Mr. Schlesinger is quoted in a feature article on the possibility of space flight. The pertinent quote is as follows: "Space travel today is not just a dream. I doubt that men will fly to the moon in my lifetime, but in our children's lifetimes perhaps there will be trips to the moon and Mars."

WE are, of course, in complete agreement with the basic view of Mr. Schlesinger. We would only differ in the matter of the time element necessary to accom-

lish space travel. We believe a trip to the moon will occur in our lifetime—perhaps within a decade; interplanetary travel to Mars quite possibly within this century. The really interesting thing to us, however, is not the time element, or the technological problems to be overcome; what we find fascinating is that a prominent scientist such as director Schlesinger has made an abrupt about face in less than 24 months. He saw space flight as a dream heretofore, and as a coming fact, today.

WE'D like to welcome Mr. Schlesinger into science fiction as a member in good standing. Perhaps one day we'll shake his hand on Luna! . . . wh



"Doesn't seem to be anyone home!"



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Flight Perilous!

by

Ray C. Noll

As Captain of the ship, Hiller knew full responsibility was his, if he ordered Marship III through the uncharted asteroid belt — to death! . . .

AS Fred Hiller slid back the door to his quarters in answer to their knock, he found them lined up tensely against the bulkheads of the companionway.

It was the best assembly area the jammed ship could offer. Here the commander with a short turn of his head could meet any pair of eyes in the nine-man crew. They had met here before, in a more friendly atmosphere, soon after acceleration stopped and once for planning. He considered it more effective for personal communication than the ship speaker system.

But this assembly was different: it was their idea. They wanted a decision. They stood without moving, waiting for him to speak. Their discussions by this time probably had narrowed the alternatives to two.

As commander, of course, he was paid to make decisions on Marship

III. And he began to realize by their faces which alternative the consensus expected. Their expressions indicated that in a degree every damn one of them was scared, scared enough to unitize their thinking.

Phil Bleck was the one fishing for an impressive opening. He moved forward to face the ship commander with hands pressed on his hips defiantly. This was *the* Phil Bleck, young man genius of United Nuclear, pressured aboard Marship III as nuclear engineer through a couple of Senators and the Secretary of Defense. Oh, he was good, as long as he wasn't under fire. So good posterity required him and he was obligated to save his skin. Hiller had expected Bleck would be the spokesman.

"We want to know if you decided yet, Hiller," Bleck nearly mocked.



"I'd have called this assembly if I had," Fred Hiller replied, emphasizing a commanderish tone of voice.

"Then you haven't." Bleck turned to the others significantly and brought back with him a harsher gaze, which he leveled at the commander. "Most of us here think there's only one sane way out. A couple will go along with any decision. But most of us, including me, want to turn back. Isn't that right?" He turned again to the men for support. Some nodded.

"We figured the chances if we keep on course," Bleck went on, breathing a little heavier. "They're

three to one against making it. I don't like those odds, Hiller," — his upper lip was curling a little — "and we didn't agree to odds like that when we volunteered. With what we know now, we can plan another trip and avoid this mess next time. That way, you'd only waste time and money: going ahead, we waste that plus the priceless knowledge of these scientists, the best the States has to offer."

While Bleck was blowing off, Hiller had studied each man in turn. They hardly represented a crew, though the men had specific jobs to perform during takeoff, transit, and setdown. They repre-

sented specialists who would bring back for the first time authoritative reports on Mars—the first two ships had not returned. . .

Marship III, several times the size of the first ones, but not one-hundredth as much publicized, had been under construction since the first Marship attempts.

The crew technicians Hiller possessed on the trip were three. And as he found the eyes of each, he realized they were not with Bleck.

Art Eastburn, an all-around engineer, whose capacity continued to amaze Hiller, and who had helped build the Marships.

Dave Hollender, astronavigator, bucking for a space ride ever since the moon-missile days; a cool thinker, who had the solar system duplicated and in accurate motion inside his skull.

Wendell Merrick, electronics engineer, who supervised the wiring of Marship III and was sensitive to the click of every relay in the almost fully automatic craft.

These were with him, which fundamentally meant they were willing to continue on course if he so decided. The others had succumbed to fear, and they recognized no authority nor purpose: their choice was a reactionary Earthward course.

“DAMMITOHELL, Hiller, we want an answer!” The commander’s silence had edged Bleck

better than words. “The issue can’t be plainer. Let’s get this indecision over with and give the orders to circle back! Or do you want us to end up as dead as the first two Mars attempts!”

“Again, Bleck, I haven’t decided,” said Commander Hiller coolly. “I’m going to take more photographs with the Newtonian. What comes out of that will affect any decision I have to make. But since we’re so concerned with decisions, Bleck, have you decided what you’ll do if I should order us through?”

The commander’s unexpected and pointed directness left Bleck blinking long enough for Eastburn to cut in before any heated rejoinder by the young nuclear engineer. Eastburn, because of his prominence and experience, held the respect of most of the men.

“When I volunteered for this jaunt, I also agreed to follow the commander’s orders,” Eastburn said firmly. “He may be wrong, but I could just as well be wrong in thinking he is. We’re after unity of action, so at least something gets done in some direction.”

Hiller smiled inwardly at that choice gem of rationality because the crew’s emotional perception made of it no more than a granule of gravel. They would have to be appealed to emotionally; under the pressure, they understood noth-

ing else. The stir of resentment evoked by Eastburn's words was dying down.

Bleck had started to say something, but Hiller's voice drowned him easily with its overpowering bass.

"Then, let's put it this way. Suppose I decide to hold course and you—ah, let's say—'persuade' me to circle back. When we all testify at the hearing, I hope you don't expect me to protect you. I'll tell them exactly what was behind the mutiny, your yellow vertebrae, and what would that do to your reputations?" Hiller had to shout the last words, because Bleck was screaming interruptions.

"It's your word against ours!" yelled Bleck into Hiller's sudden silence. "It's your word against ours that you didn't crack and blame it on us!"

The commander lifted his eyebrows. What perfect projection!

"I guess somebody in a spot like this could crack, couldn't he?" Hiller purposely addressed the remark to Bleck's followers. Most of them were staring uncertainly at Bleck's perspiration-soaked shirt, his white face, the hunching shoulders, and moving wordless lips.

"For the time being, let's leave it this way," said the commander authoritatively. "Unless conditions improve, we're turning back. If the odds seem later about even, we're

going through. In the meantime, we'll make these preparations just in case we can chance the clusters."

Possibly the instructions he gave sounded casual and spur-of-the-moment; actually, they were the careful product of his close figuring and planning, made during the last eight hours. It was more a recitation, yet he had to make it seem ad libbed. No one yet knew he had resolved on what data he had at present to hold the ship's Marsward course.

EVEN as he energized the lock mechanism on the door of his quarters, Fred Hiller began to tremble, a violent physical reaction of taut and unrested nerves. It had been capped by the crisis of the crew's resistance, a matter hardly settled, mainly delayed.

He fell into his bunk and let the shakes take over. Right then they felt ghastly, but he realized he'd feel better when they stopped. As they subsided, he tried to keep the problem out of his mind. He was too tired for that; the pictures returned again and again in front of him mostly beyond his control.

He stopped fighting them, and let the pictures progress. He justified the surrender with the thought he might learn something. might conceive a better protective device against the myriad missiles of the Belt.

The same picture always started it—Lord, was it only a few hours ago?—when Dave, the ship's astronavigator, called him to the observation bubble. . . .

Dave spent his time at the compact reflector, peering into his frequently changed eyepieces and setting up one photograph after another. The instrument was his own design, with a revolving optical flat tempered for space temperature that could be suspended out from the ship and rotated, effecting nearly a 270-degree field for the telescope.

"Take a look," Dave said. At the time, he thought there had been a slight edge to the astrogator's voice.

"Don't tell me you brought me up here again to admire colors in another variable," he had grumbled.

"You won't admire this a bit," Dave replied.

"Where're we looking?" he asked, slipping into the seat behind the eyepiece assembly.

"Space," Dave murmured. He was sighting in the finder and made azimuth adjustments.

When the field slid to rest Hiller viewed once more the gripping vastness of black wantonly perforated with intensely glaring stars. It was impossible to study the closer ones; their brightness and energy coursed pain along his optic nerve. Rather, he let his gaze wander over

the distant sprinkling of light that marked milestones toward infinity.

"Notice that hazy part in the upper field," Dave was saying.

He found it, a faint stellar gauze wisping before the stars. It appeared to be moving. But that kind of rapid movement was out of the question; it would have to be too close.

"Now, I'm tripling the power," the astrogator informed him.

With the new eyepiece in place Hiller noted that the haze had condensed into fine dust, each particle of which contrasted dimly against space compared to the stars over which it was super-imposed. And it *did* move! Part of it already was creeping into the invisible curve of the eyepiece rim.

He pulled back from the telescope to look at Dave's grim features. The quickening in his stomach meant anxiety, he recognized it easily. Anxiety over what? How could he have known then what it meant? Subawaresly, he must have.

"What the hell is it, Dave?"

Hollender handed him photographs out of a transparent file cabinet. "Here're some blowups under high power. Visible proof from these, but nothing highly accurate from the spectrography."

"But this is asteroid stuff," Hiller nodded at the photographs. "They look like pinhead star clusters."

"That's what they are, clusters," Dave replied seriously. "Fragments of planetoids, evidently, revolving around common centers of gravity."

"What're they doing around here? I mean, are they strays from the Asteroid Belt or something?"

DAVE swept the back of his hand over a row of astronomical texts. "If you can find any mention of 'em in there, I wish you'd let me know. And they're a long way from the Asteroids."

"Well, you're the damn astronomer in this blowout," frowned Hiller impatiently. "What's a good guess on 'em?"

"I don't know how good it is, but my guess is we're running into an inner Asteroid Belt. I'll bet the first two flights ended here . . ."

"A what?"

"Inner Asteroid Belt," Dave stated. "A puny one, compared to the one outside Mars, but none-the less a Belt. Uncharted, and deadly."

Tension spread along Hiller's back. "We've had no advance data on crap like that, not one bit."

"We have now," Dave shrugged.

"Why didn't one of the first trips miss this?"

"This Inner Belt orbits, too. Clustered minor particles with low reflectivity may be a phenomenon found only in scattered sections of

of the Belt. The first Marships happened to hit them, just like us. Certainly no light instrument on Earth I know of could pick them up. They'd move out too fast to register on a plate. So, they're our babies."

The commander remarked soberly, "You evidently already know what this means."

"It's a lousy break . . . The first ships must have tried to get through . . ."

Hiller brought his palms together to bolster the searching of his mind. He was surprised to find them moist. "What about the size of the particles in these clusters?"

"From what I've calculated, they're fruitstand variety, for the most part."

"Watermelons?" grunted Hiller, pessimistically.

"A few, maybe. But they're not cranberries, either."

"Density?"

"Roughly eight or nine. I can get that figure closer later on."

Hiller became irritated at himself for letting what started to be short silence grow longer. The astronomer may have followed his thoughts; he handed him a long photograph.

"Here's one I made at 150 diameters of the general area of the Inner Belt we're due to pass through on our present course."

Hiller winced at the sight: the fuzzy glow thinned in the fore-

ground and thickening, paraded through the middle distance, still stretching on until it faded from the lens' capability.

"We'll have to revise some of our theories about the formation of the Outer Belt," Dave was saying. "It's apparently much deeper and wider than anyone's guessed. Looks to me like a dead star went through our system, breaking up a planet and maybe peeling a little off itself. That would account perhaps for the retrograde orbit—"

"Dave, I don't give a good goddam about any dead star!" Hiller exploded his tension. "How far apart are these space fruit?"

"A mile here, a couple of miles there. I really haven't figured that aspect yet."

"Well, figure it." The commander jumped down from the observation seat. "Get George, the psychologist, he types fast. Compile what data you have, have him type it, send it down to me. I'll be in my quarters. And hurry, man, or they'll be more than stars dead around here."

He slammed open the entrance panel to the observatory. By that time he had cooled enough to pause and throw Dave a half-smile and limp salute.

"Thanks for the wide-awake work. Now, get busy."

HIS watch showed he had been drowsing for more than an

hour. The pictures had exhausted themselves, and his head felt clearer. He had needed that rest badly.

Sitting up, he reached into the bunk cupboard and poured a drink. Now that Bleck was temporarily emotionally neutralized and the brains uncertain, it was time to follow up with a little rationality to substantiate his position. Anyway, he wanted verification and cross-checking of his plans. He *could* be way off base.

Over the ship's speaker system he summoned Merrick, Eastburn, and Hollender to his quarters. They arrived promptly, almost too promptly, as if they had been waiting. It was probably obvious to them, as it was to him, the problem called for more than one man's calculation.

Nothing was said while he splashed out drinks. The men spread over the floor where they could find room and left him the bunk. They were evidently going to let him say something first, so he didn't disappoint them.

"I don't think I'm surprising any of you when I say we're pushing through the clusters, regardless of Bleck's nerves," he began. "What's probably on your mind is my motive. You may understandably feel Bleck, no matter how badly he expressed his point of view, may have something. Sure, maybe my pride is driving me ahead. Maybe

I'm being as emotional in wanting to buck the clusters as Bleck is in wanting to run.

"I'll let you judge that for yourselves after you hear what's back of those orders for preparation I gave. First I want to hear from Hollender. What's the latest and most accurate you can give me now on density of the particles, particle proximity, and our relative velocities?"

The astronavigator unfolded a paper taken from his shirt pocket. "Well, I have three results on density because of observation problems. I'll give you the average. Mean density comes out to 7.8, lower than I first figured. Roughly on proximity, 1800 yards, and that's more bunched than I estimated. They're clustered, and that's about it," he shrugged.

"Now, on relative velocities," he continued, "I could get it pretty close, knowing ours is a constant power-off glide. We exceed the clusters' orbital velocity by three m. p. s. But our angle of intersection with the Belt will reduce any actual impact to about two m. p. s. In other words, particles would be overtaking us at about that speed."

Hiller nodded. "That's about the way I worked it out. One more thing, Dave: the depth of the cluster band."

"The part we have to worry about's only a little over a hun-

dred-thousand miles in depth. The rest is scattered asteroid strays and shouldn't bother us. We'll be three hours maybe in transit through the stuff."

THE men in the cramped commander's quarters stirred slightly, wincing at the transit time. The other figures could not be readily personalized; but each of them could visualize himself sweating out three hours of stellar bombardment, the effects of which would not be known accurately until the Belt was entered. And each could visualize ultimately Marship III as a whirling, shredded mass, spouting synthetic atmosphere, and glowing redly from rampant and uncontrolled fusion.

"On the fuel?" the commander asked of Eastburn. "Anything new on that?"

"Deceleration definitely out," the engineer replied firmly. "We couldn't afford the drain needed later to catch Mars on her way around. From what I gather of the problem, acceleration wouldn't do anyway, but that's even more impossible. It would increase setdown consumption.

"Hollender and I've calculated the fuel drain required to circumnavigate the clusters. It came close, close enough to make you want to cry. But not close enough. The wall of the clusters happens to be too

spread out and in near-perfect line with our point of rendezvous with Mars. If we'd spotted them sooner, we could have hurdled 'em with a few spurts of the guide jets. By the time we got it figured, we'd already passed the critical point by 23 minutes. That's how close it was.

"The fuel was figured for this trip with very little margin, and we used some margin already because of that lovely instrument error on takeoff. I'd be a lot happier if we had a fusion system with fewer limitations, like the ones they're working on now."

"We agreed to this firing system and realized its risks—all because we'd rather not wait for the ones in development," Hiller reminded. "We're comfortably powered, anyway, provided we follow our original firing schedule. So, that means we enter the Inner Belt at our present velocity without changing course."

Merrick spoke upruffling the red hairs that partially covered his shiny scalp. "Back track here a minute, you boys went over that rapid. I think I get everything but the velocity business. We connect with the Belt at two m. p. s.? Sounds like optimistic but bad arithmetic to me." Screwing up his mouth, he squinted at Hollender.

Hiller found himself laughing, and it felt good. "Pardon our dynamics-centered minds," he said. He

unsnappped his ballpoint from his pocket and placed it over the air blower grill.

"Say the horizontal braces on this grill running parallel are the clusters' paths at 12 m. p. s. My ballpoint's the ship at 15, traveling in the same direction as the clusters. In that case, *we* would collide with the particles, overtaking them at three m. p. s. right?"

Merrick nodded. "I see that, but —"

"Okay," Hiller went on. "Now suppose we crossed the Belt at right angles to the paths." He moved the ballpoint straight up the grill.

"They'd sock us at 12 m. p. s.," Merrick deduced. "So, what you're getting at is the angle—"

"The angle makes the difference," finished Hiller. "If we entered the belt at about this angle"—he inclined the ballpoint up slightly from the horizontal—"we'd sail through with the same velocity as the particles. If we hit any, it would be a nudge from our transit motion through the Belt or from their velocity or revolution, which is probably very low."

"I get it," Merrick slapped his forehead. "Our present course cuts the Belt at such an angle that we get bumped at two m. p. s. instead of 12." The others nodded. He reflected a moment, adding, "So, I get a bullet through the head at

1200 feet per second or 200 feet per second; I still get it in the end."

"Not in this case," Hiller smiled. "There's been quite a little work done on effects of meteor impact by the Air Force. I've got a summary of it in the control room. Art, here, could probably tell you more about it than I could."

EASTBURN hugged his knees. "Not much, I don't think," he arched an eyebrow. "Fred's being modest, the guy who designed the meteor-scanning device used on all Marships. I'll take the ball, though, on this one."

"Del, we've got a brute of a hull on this ship, twice as resistant as the ones on I and II. Second, it's smooth and curved. Third, it's going awfully fast. The studies the Air Force has been able to make so far show that small-sized meteors either glance off a ship and disintegrate swiftly from the excessive rotation set up from the collision, or they explode on contact from built-up kinetic energy."

"There seems to be three types of contact explosion. Where the angle of impact is not quite perpendicular, the particle creases the hull and explodes along its trajectory. This is the usual situation in the heat-generation collision and rarely harms the ship."

"Perpendicular impact, however, does the damage. At low velocities

and densities perpendicular impact craters the hull and most of the blast effect is dispersed laterally and to the rear. At higher velocities the particle vaporizes but the explosive force craters the hull and shapes inward, a lot like the effect of an air gun pellet on plate glass. Although the hull penetration may be mere pea size, blast and compression inside can be terrific, besides the sharp shock throughout the whole ship."

Hiller grinned. "Thanks for bringing out the situation so well, Art. Holldender's the mathematician here, and I don't go in for formulating odds. But I'll give odds right now on our getting through with one perpendicular strike. Any takers?"

"That's a hell of a bet," Merrick griped. "If you lose, who's around to collect?"

"I'm talking odds," the commander said. "Anyway, you over-estimate the effect of a perpendicular strike. In a closed compartment it could be rough. By leaving every compartment hatch open, the compression would dissipate through-out the ship with less damage."

Art Eastburn frowned. "How about the air supply, Fred? With no compartmentations, one big enough hole and most of the ship's air supply could escape before we could patch up."

"Good point," Hiller replied,

"but if the hole were as large as you may be imagining, the blast pressure would probably blow out ports and open seams, leaving us in hopeless shape. The smaller holes, on the other hand, could be patched, the kind we expect. I have reason to believe that won't be a problem. A hunch, maybe."

"I guess we can let you get by with one hunch," Eastburn smiled wryly. "But I can see what you're getting at on the odds you mentioned. Considering Hollender's estimates on the spacing of this fruit-sized stuff, I might not take your bet."

"Another factor," the commander noted, finishing his drink. "You don't go through a barbed-wire fence standing up."

"Granted," agreed Merrick. "Are you giving again with that ballpoint?"

"Last time," promised Hiller. He held the pen over the grill, pointing it at the approximate angle the ship was to take through the Inner Belt. "That's the way we're heading now. We've set the gyros to keep our nose in front, for the time being, to satisfy tradition and maintain a consistent sighting base."

"Our main problem is avoiding perpendicular strikes and encouraging oblique ones. The position of the ship in relation to the particle direction becomes important, then." He moved his ballpoint at nearly a

45-degree angle to the grill lines. "We won't head in the course indicated by the nose, but we'll gyro the ship to this position. That way we obtain the maximum deflection."

The men were silent momentarily. Merrick suddenly sat up straight.

"It seems to me pointing the nose right at the asteroid flow would be better."

"You forget our transit velocity, Del," the commander observed. "We'd be chancing running into as many particles perpendicularly with the ship lengthwise at two m. p. s. as we would miss by pointing our nose at those catching up with us at about the same speed."

Merrick threw up his hands. "Okay, okay," he surrendered. "All I hope is you math boys have it figured right."

"We're running it through the calculator to round off the rough edges," Hollender assured him.

The silence grew until the commander stood up and asked. "So, on the basis of what we've covered, am I too much of a gambler in going ahead?"

The others had risen and Eastburn was the first to offer his hand, the others following. They spoke at the same time their assurance and backing. But Hiller's thoughts were already dwelling on the most bothersome variable of all—Phil

Bleck.

When he discovered from Hollender before he left that Bleck had no idea when the ship would enter the Inner Belt, the variable began to assume minor proportions.

“TEST drill 30 minutes! Test drill 30 minutes!”

The commander adjusted the mike closer to his chest and turned up the volume on the portable transmission unit for the ship speaker system. Under the coming circumstances he would need as much freedom as possible.

The panel before him gradually lighted up as the stations checked in. They were in no hurry since he had informed them in the last meeting that the Inner Belt was still six hours away. That had provided Bleck with enough time to map what counteraction he had in mind to oppose a decision for continuing Marsward.

The commander noticed with satisfaction the colored lights wink on over the board, each with its own vital significance. The row to the left on the panel, half alight, indicated locked-open compartment doors. Near the bottom a circular array showed Eastburn was prepared to activate the gyros from the mechanical control center of the ship. The green bulb newly burning indicated Merrick had completed his check of the electronics

at the control center in the next compartment to the commander's and was standing by.

The blue glow at the top of the board was Hollender at his observation post. The fire control posts—two, stationed near the ship's center—blinked in almost together. Wayne Somerset, chemical engineer, headed the patch crew made up of the zoologist and archeologist, the team which was the last to signal readiness.

It lacked 12 minutes until drill time.

Hiller switched on the monitors for the nuclear chambers which he lighted up by activating remote spotlights. He had some trouble adjusting the scanning in one of the monitors for the fuel compartments, but it came in clear by 10 minutes until drill.

“Test drill 10 minutes!” he announced. “I want an oral report on these items from your stations: suits, rations, extra oxygen portables, first aid and anti-ray kits.”

The reports came in affirmative, and Hiller relaxed slightly. The phrase “shipshape” kept coming into his mind but he rejected it as histrionic. But maybe that was the word for the whole situation, with his being guilty of plenty of hamming. Come to think of it, it was more like TV fantascience than anything else.

“Bleck,” he broadcast, “leave

George at the fire station and report for special orders."

He suspected Bleck was sulking through the preparations and would do George little good. The best place for Bleck was with him, suspecting what he did about the man's reactions.

"Test drill five minutes," he was announcing as a sullen Bleck arrived at master control.

"Art, better adjust the pumps to lower air pressure. Somerset, plug in the patch kits for molten. Fire crews, uncap and pressurize your mist tanks."

Hiller swung in his chair to face Bleck. "Sit down," he said. He caught the puzzlement on the man's face over the realistic degree of the last orders he gave.

"Adjust the magnetizing on your boots to high, unless you have to travel," he continued. "Unbind emergency deceleration straps and stand by."

Bleck's color faded with the commander's last words. "Why the hell all the realism, Hiller? Your rank puffing you up?"

Keeping his eyes on Bleck, the commander went on, "One minute to test drill. Only this isn't a test drill. Repeat, this is *not* a test drill. It's the real thing. We are now into the Belt. Repeat, this is the real thing."

Bleck clawed over the bulkheads of master control's cubicle search-

ing tactilely for the deceleration straps, his eyes riveted blankly on Hiller.

"I take complete responsibility for this deception," Hiller spoke to the crew, "and I can justify it. Yes, Hollender, Eastburn, and Merrick were in on it. They also agree with me that our chances of getting through are good as long as everyone does his job. You should be glad I saved you worrying."

"We're inside the Belt now and the way to get out alive is to stay alert and follow the drill plan. I'll keep you informed from master control how we're doing without pulling punches. Let's have nothing on the intercom unless it's strictly business."

BLECK had found the straps, but he had not fastened any. Instead he crouched, burrowing his head into one of the pads. He was curling up in a knot and sobbing.

"I figured you'd break," Hiller mumbled more to himself than to the quasi-comatic nuclear engineer. Breaking, this was the best place for him. He wouldn't exactly boost the others' morale were he around them. Nor with Hiller's dirty pool, could Bleck get the chance now to lower morale enough to push over a mutiny.

"Art, let's gyro her to the transit angle," he broadcast. "I'll cross-check on my indicator up

here."

A faint vibration seeped through his feet as the electric motors revved. Watching the unmoving star-scape through the front ports, he waited for the slow shifting of the field. The effect was as if the heavens had begun an expansive revolution about the ship, the stars drifting lazily from their familiar positions in the ports.

The commander watched the positional needle creep away from the arbitrary course zero. It swept beyond 10 and slowed at 15, halting a little beyond 16.

"I show 16.2," Hiller communicated.

"Check," Art answered on the intercom.

There it was, physically as much as any commander could do under the circumstances. The rest was largely luck—and, of course, how fast he acted to offset any bad luck.

Hiller took the time to explain to the crew the tactics planned in traversing the Belt.

"You guys are gamblers or you wouldn't have volunteered for this commute," he concluded. "The only difference with the hand you're holding now is that somebody else had to figure the odds for you. They're not bad odds either. If you grouse and jump for the straps every time a plum taps the hull, they're 50-50. Keep your heads and follow my instructions and the odds

go in our favor.

"We're going to be hit, we're going to be hit again, and maybe a couple of dozen times after that. If a big one slams straight into us, somebody might get a bloody nose. But we can get through even if the ship turns out to look like a thick piece of swiss cheese.

"Right now we're sailing in between thinned-out stuff, Hollender tells me. The first hour will be a tea party compared to the second.

"The air pump room sits smack in ship center. Anyone who'd like to zip his suit and shut himself in with the pumps has my permission. Speak up now; I can't force co-operation in something like this."

The intercom stayed silent.

"Thanks," the commander said. "One more thing. Fish a couple of hunks of cotton out of your first aid. After you hear the first hit, you'll know where to put 'em."

HILLER watched the changed stellar configurations through the ports. The stars shone in a friendly brightness compared to the darkness around them. That darkness held invisible missiles which possessed only velocity and direction, harmless vectors. Only when they met the hull would there be a molecular and not only calculative indication of their presence.

The ship rode silently, weighted with the heaviness of a grim expect-

tancy.

Hiller curiously switched on his meteor-scanner, making sure to keep the circuits connecting to the guiding jets and gyros cold. Even if they could afford the fuel, the gadget would tear itself apart with the plethora of loose particles to monitor.

The greenly glowing two radar scopes' limited field was clear for the first few moments. Then three fine lines sped down the center, and before they faded two others plummeted beside their fading tracks.

Watching the scope fascinated him. The lines traced, glowed, and faded, always cutting the same angle, so far staying fairly clear of the center. He caught himself tensing when one began at top center and coursed swiftly toward the ship. A trail actually disappeared under the center marker but came out the other side too swiftly for him to wince under the anticipated shock.

Were they increasing in frequency? Definitely they were. A shower of lines bracketing the scope center substantiated him.

He realized why more tracks appeared near the center than at the edge of the scope. Most particles evidently were small enough so that at the outer limits of the radar's range the trails made no register. Also, the tracks glowed

brighter near the center and faded toward the edge.

Too, he became aware the trails were hardly straight. The ship's transit velocity through the Belt bent the trails toward an arc on the scope face.

He saw the track start at the top: but before realization came that it had gone no farther than the center, his head jarred in an instantaneous headache. The quick jolt through his feet and buttocks arrived at the same time, and his sight washed away into a watery blur.

Naturally, after admonishing the crew to use ear plugs, he had neglected to use his. While his eardrums still throbbed with the sharp compression, he fought for clear vision.

The hull mockup illuminated, he searched for the point of impact on the electronic three-dimensional damage guide. No wonder all the rough stuff; it turned out to be a good-sized crater above the control compartment. Perhaps it hadn't been as bad elsewhere. There was no penetration, but after that wallop he wasn't looking forward to any.

"Check in!" he announced.

Dutifully the crew responded, their voices sounding heavy with affected steadiness.

"That landed on the front above control. The party's livening up, so

stand by."

Hiller noticed with concern the starfield drifting by the ports. The positional dial showed 17.6 but falling.

"What's with the gyros, Art?" he asked.

"Impact shifted the ship position," he answered. "I'm resetting."

The commander bit his lip, suppressing the pun crossing his mind that this was a new angle. He hadn't figured that much kinetic energy affecting the ship position. As long as the impact came near center, fine; but with a strike near the extremities of the ship, naturally the effect was to spin it, like a top without a molecule of friction.

Oversight Number One. Hell, why count 'em? This one in itself could be fatal. The gyros were never meant to counteract that kind of gyration. Maybe a couple of impacts, yes. After that, they could burn out.

SOMEBODY opened the door of a boiler factory and shut it in a millisecond. The reverberation surprisingly proved slight.

The commander peered closely at the damage guide. A short dark line near the stern: it had taken him a second inspection to find it. He had been looking for a crater.

"Crease over the firing chambers," he reported, then shifted his attention to the indicator. The

needle faltered at 18 as the gyros kicked in harder and fell toward 16 again.

"What's the condition of the gyro motors, Art?" Hiller asked.

"Warming up," was the answer, "They're going to have to run full to do any good at all."

"How about using the jets once in a while," Hiller suggested. "Too hard on the fuel?"

"Once in a while, it wouldn't be," the engineer replied. "Constantly steadying a spinning ship this big with the guide jets would take more fuel than we could spare."

Hiller swiftly considered the few possibilities there were. Burning out the gyros was a risk he could not take. Going over the fuel margin was out of the question. And the alternative to these—spinning until they left the Belt.

Spinning provided the only choice. It wasn't necessarily fatal, but it increased the chances for perpendicular strikes. Actually, with such conditions, Bleck's sneering odds held more merit.

Bleck!

The shadow behind him, only a vague outline on the control panel, moved. Hiller fell sideways from the seat, twisting around one of the arms.

Bleck's magnetized boot slammed into the seat and left him overbalancing long enough for Hil-

ler to scramble to his feet.

The man appeared berserk with fear, except he had it channeled toward the destruction of what he assigned as its cause—the ship commander.

No need to search; nothing serving as a weapon lay within reach. Taking the time to stoop and remove his boot meant suicide.

Warily Bleck advanced with the retrieved boot upraised, clumsily limping on the other. Hiller backed until he felt the acceleration straps behind him on the bulkhead. There was no more backing after that.

The last resort—something he did not relish doing—was broadcasting the crew his plight, pulling them from their stations. Anyway, by the time someone arrived—if that didn't faze the man, he would have to try ducking under the weapon and fighting it out.

As Bleck paused to savor his ascendant position and measure the clobbering distance, Hiller started the first word of the announcement. His thinking was riding the crest of a wave of fear which threatened at any moment to break. And the first word was all he managed.

What saved him was his grasp of the straps behind him. On low for movement, his boots would not have held.

His grip had tightened instinctively the moment the ship lurched to the port side, a lurch so sharp he

swung out from the bulkhead. His head and chest felt as if they would cave in under the compression.

Wearing only one boot, the other demagnetized, Bleck probably was only beginning to analyze how he was dying when he sailed the length of the control room. His free boot dented the bulkhead and rang against the floor. The boot attached to his foot was hidden under the mixture of sodden clothes and shattered limbs that clung wetly to the bulkhead and began oozing toward the outside of the centrifuge.

For the ship was now gyrating tightly, the stars parading endlessly past the ports. Coming out of shock, strangely, was what bothered Hiller most, the merry-go-rounding.

His hands hurt, he noticed, so he released the needless grip on the straps. Dazedly he navigated to the control seat, sat down, and this time fastened his nylon safety bands and set his boots for high.

THE concussion effects wouldn't blink out of his eyes and he stared blearily at the damage indicator. He also found it difficult keeping his eyes from Bleck's remains.

"Fred? Fred!" It was Art's voice. Of course, he hadn't announced damage yet. How long had it been?

"Report!" That's all the commander could get out.

The crew responded weakly. The roll gave him time to locate the damage as a definite penetration in the fuel chambers, evidently by a large particle. The TV monitors showed no tanks dented, and the fine gauges indicated no leaks. One thing, though: the temperature of the tanks had skyrocketed.

He announced the damage and ordered suits on. It felt good to be thinking again. A penetration in the air-filled portion of the ship and the temperature could bake uninsulated flesh promptly. Oversight Number Two.

Art reminded him over the intercom diplomatically, "I'm not counteracting the spin, Fred."

"That's all we can do," the commander returned. "We're going to have to spin through and like it."

"We'll be in the thickest in a couple of minutes." It was Hollender's voice. "I think the patch crew ought to get some business."

"Belt in unless you're traveling," Hiller reminded. Only then did he bring himself to relate to the crew how Bleck died, hoping it would be of constructive value, provided they didn't frighten.

With the next oblique collisions Hiller found the suit better muffled the sound. He wished there was something to be done about the wrenching of his insides at each im-

pact.

The suits helped little on the more direct collisions. Added to that, the ship was gyrating faster and pseudo-gravity pulled at him from the front ports. Giddiness on top of everything else was not improving matters.

He crumpled under the wave of heat and compression when the first particle penetrated the air compartments of the ship. Three of his instrument dials cracked and he felt as if he had received a blow on each square inch of his body. The penetration he located as in the sleeping quarters and sent the patch crew there at once.

About that time the second one penetrated. The jolt was sickening. Somerset reported both members of his crew unconscious when their boots let them slide against bulkheads at the impact. Worse, he said the patch equipment had spun loose and shorted, bent, and fused. He made clear any patch repair as being hopeless.

While Hiller listened to the report, he was sick inside his suit from the centrifugal effect. He recalled how he'd also been sick on the Whirlwind ride at the amusement park when he was a kid. A hell of a space commander. They could use a good collision against the direction of gyration any time, provided the sudden deceleration of the twirl didn't hemorrhage them

internally.

Why was he worried about gyrations when the patch kit was a casualty? That latest development cinched it: the odds on getting through were falling every minute. He wasn't facing it, either.

One favorable element, however, was appearing: the particles size remained uniformly small. No structural damage of any consequence had occurred from the collisions already experienced. The hull, at least, could sustain the heat and explosion effects.

SUBAWARELY the commander realized his thinking was punchy. The impacts of missiles against the heating ship's hull constituted a slowly fading pattern of noise and pressure and pain which he was observing objectively, almost amusedly. When he attempted to read the damage indicator or communicate with the crew, the effort became immense and the discomfort great. So much easier to remain contemplative about it.

No doubt this was the condition of the crew. After so much beating, the organic function can tolerate no more. Oversight Number Three.

The commander was aware sufficiently to hope Art Eastburn kept the air cooler circulating. He had already assumed, since the crew was suited in, that the engineer had cut off the fresh air supply. They

didn't have to lose it all, just most of it, enough to suffocate somewhere in space.

That hunch? Seemed a hunch fitted in there somewhere. Was it really important? Nothing seemed important except escaping the punishment the particles of the Inner Asteroid Belt were inflicting on the near-senseless bodies in the spinning ship.

His thought processes alternately raced and then froze in a semi-conscious sleep. Between impacts rationality awoke in brief segments of contemplative continuity and slowed when another concussion shuddered the ship. And soon there was no rationality but fantasies rooted in present trauma . . .

Starlight seeped through the punctured hull around the control chamber. The air supply had long since whistled into space. What ship atmosphere that was salvaged had been piped into the suits and rationed among the men.

They had circumnavigated the Inner Belt after plotting a course back to Earth. Hollender's computations presented them with a rough chance of making it before the air would no longer maintain their life processes.

But it had not worked out. The Earth was yet a bright star in the front ports when the coughing began, when the function of respiration became painful labor.

Some were already choosing the quick way out. Hollender had entered the control room, waved a hand in salute, and unzipped his suit, even as Hiller watched. The instant freezing from the space-filled ship bloated the body slightly, but otherwise there was little difference. Hollender stood statuesquely, coldly rigid, clamped solidly by his boots.

Art Eastburn arrived next, unsmiling. The two men regarded each other, chests heaving, for an endless moment. The mechanical engineer reached for his suit zipper.

"Art, hold on! Not yet, Art, not yet!"

"Not what, Fred? Come out of it, man!"

Eastburn was standing over him, speaking against the plastiglas of Hiller's visor. He sat before the control board, still cinched in his seat. The mechanical engineer wore no suit and he was smiling.

"We're through," his friend was saying. "We made it, Fred."

THE ship commander shook his head. The words were supposed to mean something vital. He played them back in his mind.

"We're through. We're through."

If he could understand why the silence hurt his ears, why he was tense, why— Realization spread over his body in a wave of exhilarating relief.

Speech failed him after Art helped him remove his suit. Speech was unnecessary the way Art rapidly filled him in on the lack of casualties and minor damage.

"How long was I out?" the commander at last brought himself to ask, noticing Bleck's body had been removed.

"Over an hour," Art answered. "When the rocks stopped punching I couldn't raise you on the intercom. Found you passed out. You wouldn't revive so I took advantage of my second-in-command rank and straightened out the ship's spin with the guide jets."

Hiller glanced at the ports. The stars rode steadily, and he was aware his viscera felt stable.

"But dammit, Art, all this air!" Hiller complained, waving his hand over his head. "Aren't you over-generous? We must have lost enough through the hull to put us in suits, or at least turn us back."

The engineer grinned teasingly. "I don't think we've lost a cubic inch, Fred."

"The patch kit?"

"Still out."

"But all those penetrations with us in a twirl—"

"All taken care of." Art was enjoying himself.

Hiller's hunch, never considered seriously, jumped back into his mind. That had to be the only explanation.

Art was going on, "As a matter of fact, there's a good example right there." He pointed above them to the bulkhead, layered with plastic, a coolant area, and duralite, that separated the men from space. "One of the toughest hits the ship took, blasted an inch-round hole, looks like. No wonder you conked out."

The after effects of the experience again was making it difficult for the commander to focus his eyes. He unbound his seat bands and clanked directly under the spot, his friend following.

From the closer viewpoint he could see a small, glistening white circle in the bulkhead surrounded by a ring of heat-discolored metal. That was no patch.

He grinned back at Art. "Automatic, eh?"

"I never considered the possibility," Art replied. "I figured the inside pressure would be too great."

"I'm not trying to sound off big," the commander said, "but I had it in the back of my mind when I decided to sail through. As it turned out, it meant the difference between survival or otherwise. Had I known that, I might not have gambled."

Fred Hiller returned to his seat and pushed himself down. His strength was only beginning to return.

"With a bigger hole, it wouldn't have worked. But I was counting on little holes with our strong hull. It would take more pressure than what's inside the ship to stop the instant freeze of space cold in small openings like that.

"I think our frozen air plugs will hold way longer than it takes to repair the patch kit. Matter of fact, I may leave them in until we hit Mars' atmosphere. I'm feeling sentimental about them already!"

THE END

INTRODUCING the AUTHOR

★ Ray C. Noll ★

(Continued from Page 2)

of the impracticality of English by three advisors who cornered me one day for two hours.

Journalism and I never got along so well. I was graduated as a presumed journalist, but in the

meantime I had become interested in radio broadcasting and writing, which I followed with enthusiasm for a year.

With this richly generalized background I went into public re-

lations which I'm satisfied with at the moment, especially since it provides victuals for my family of three girls and a long-suffering wife. The work is managing a branch office for Radio Reports, Inc., a national organization which monitors radio and TV programs in major population areas. It acts as a publicity and public relations adjunct to advertising agencies, corporations, and special interest groups and gives them informational coverage on what's being said about them or their interests over radio and television.

As I say, I'm satisfied with the work and enjoy doing it from an office high in the Berkeley hills overlooking San Francisco Bay. But there are ominous signs on the horizon.

Look, I'm writing. That means I've accomplished my goal to be a *wrighter*, but you know what? I'm getting interested in psychology.

Why is that ominous? I may be starting that cycle over again! Maybe this will be a good place to leave it— where I came in.

—Ray C. Noll



"I guess this is as good a spot as any!"

Highways In Hiding

by

George O. Smith

Mekstrom's Disease meant death; yet some victims lived on—indestructible supermen. Who should control the cure — science, or humanity?

(Four Part Serial — Part III)

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

In a world of espers and telepaths, Steve Cornell leads a normal existence. As an esper he is a first-rate mechanical engineer and is happy with his lot in life. Particularly he is happy with his fiancée, Catherine, a telepath. Their opposite psi powers make them an ideal couple.

But on the day Steve and Catherine elope they become involved in a highway accident. Catherine has pointed out telepathically a strange road sign behind them. Travelling at high speed, Cornell lets his esper power travel back to the sign to dig it. It is a wheel-shaped sign with one of the spokes apparently missing. At this moment, with his esper concentrated behind them, Cornell fails to notice an obstruction in the road. The car crashes into it and he blanks out.

Cornell awakes in a hospital run by the Medical Center controlled by

Scholars who have both esper and telepath powers. He is told he was alone in the accident, and all records support the medical diagnosis of Cornell: delusion from shock.

Cornell is told a farmer family, the Hendersons, pulled him from the wreck. Vainly he tries to convince a Dr. Thorndyke and Nurse Farrow someone is lying. He leaves the hospital vowing to find his fiancée.

He visits the Henderson farm, meets the family, including a daughter Marian, but gets the same story. He leaves, and since the only clue he has is the strange sign he had been digging at the time of the accident, he returns to find it normal, with the missing spoke replaced. Coincidentally, now the Hendersons have vanished, leaving no forwarding address.

Suspecting that the highway sign somehow ties in with his situation, Cornell finds other signs as he tra-



vels, and gradually deduces that missing spokes are pointers to selected areas. Following one of them he meets a young girl who is normal except for one astounding fact: her body is steel-hard; she is, in fact, as near indestructible as a mortal can be. Cornell is staggered with the thought that the highway signs are tied in somehow with a secret race of superhumans, object unknown.

Cornell discovers that a little-known disease, called Mekstrom's Disease, is the reason for the superbody. Mekstrom's Disease was

brought to Earth by an early space pioneer, and is considered fatal by the Medical authorities, since no person afflicted has ever survived—the body turning to stone-like substance with death occurring as vital organs are reached.

Cornell visits Medical Center, posing as a science writer, and pumps Scholar Phelps, head of the Center. He is startled to find that Phelps is himself a Mekstrom. Cornell leaves the Center before his awareness of this fact becomes known to Phelps.

Feeling the need for help in his

quest to find his missing fiancée, Cornell teams up with a telepath, Nurse Farrow, after he proves to her there is substance to his suspicions. But then, suddenly, Nurse Farrow disappears. It becomes apparent to Cornell that everyone whom he has contact with is slated for some sinister disposal.

By posting a letter to the Harrison family, Cornell, using his esper power, follows the letter to its forwarding destination, and meets the farmer family again. He finds they are all Mekstroms, and also discovers his fiancée Catherine in their care—a victim of Mekstrom's Disease.

The Harrisons explain to Cornell that they are part of the underground Highways In Hiding, taking all Mekstrom victims they can find, and curing them—into supermen. They explain that the Medical Center, headed by Phelps prefers to select its cure victims, to form a new governing group of supermen to rule Earth. The Harrisons feel Cornell has been allowed to go his way hoping he would lead the Medical Center to the secret base of the underground, which is opposed to this idea.

Cornell is torn between a desire to be a Mekstrom himself, and the anger of being a pawn in a colossal duel. The Harrisons suggest he submit to experimentation to determine if he can "catch" Mekstrom's Disease. He submits but the experiment is a failure.

Frustrated, Cornell slips away from the Harrison group, vowing to start a private war of his own against both sides of the Mekstrom superrace.

CHAPTER XIV

I left Homestead with a half-formed idea that I was going to visit Bruce, Wisconsin, long enough to say goodbye to Catherine and to release her from any matrimonial involvement she may have felt binding. I did not relish this idea, but I felt that getting it out, done, and agreed was only a duty.

But as I hit the road and had time to think, I knew that my half-formed intention was a sort of martyrdom; I was going to renounce myself in a fine welter of womanly tears and then go staggering off into the setting sun to die of my mental wounds. I took careful stock of myself and faced the fact that my half-baked idea was a sort of suicide-wish; walking into any Mekstrom way station now was just asking for capture and a fast trip to their reorientation rooms. Besides, the facts of my failure and my taking-of-leave would be indication enough for Catherine that I was bowing out. It would be better for Catherine, too, to avoid a fine, high-strung, emotional scene. Bitterly I remembered the little bawling session in the Harrison living room that night; Catherine would not die for want of a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. In fact, as she'd said pragmatically, well balanced people never die of broken

hearts.

Having finally convinced myself of the validity of this piece of obvious logic, I suddenly felt a lot better. My morose feeling faded away; my conviction of utter uselessness died; and my half-formed desire to investigate a highly hypothetical Hereafter took an abrupt about-face. And in place of this collection of undesirable self-pities came a much nicer emotion. It was a fine feeling, that royal anger that boiled up inside of me. I couldn't lick 'em and I couldn't join 'em, so Goddammit, I was going out to pull something down, even if it all came down around my own ears.

Even though I recognized the feeling as being that jealousy that Phillip Harrison had mentioned, I went right ahead and planned a big poke in the teeth for both sides.

I stopped long enough to check the Bonanza .375 both visually and perceptively and then loaded it full. I consulted a road map to chart a course. Then I took off with the coal wide open and the damper rods all the way out and made the wheels roll towards the East.

I avoided all the main highways that I could, and I especially gave anything that looked like a Hidden Highway a very wide berth. I went down several, but always in the wrong direction. And in the meantime, I kept my sense of perception on the alert for any pursuit. I

drove with my eyes alone. I could have made it all the way to the Mississippi by nightfall if I'd not taken the time to duck any of the roads that were served by those Highway signs; that took me on a couple of arduous detours. But when I got good, sick, and tired of driving, I was not very far from the River. I found a motel in a rather untravelled spot and sacked in for the night.

I awoke at the crack of dawn with a feeling of impending *something*. It was not doom, because any close-danger would have nudged me on the bump of perception. Nor was it exactly good because I'd have awakened happily looking forward to it. Something odd was up and doing. I dressed hastily, and as I pulled my clothing on I took a slow dig at the other cabins in the motel.

Number One contained a sleeping man, a salesman type I decided after digging through his baggage. Number Two occupied by an elderly couple who were obviously tourists; they were loaded with tourist-type junk and four or five cameras. Number Three harbored a pair of adulterers and Number Four was almost overflowing with a gang of schoolgirls packed sardine-wise in the single bed. Number Five was mine. Nothing dangerous here. Number Six bedded

down a couple of adolescents whose parents must have been total blanks; any kid of mine who came home after what they'd been doing would get the hide tanned off of him or her as the case might be. Number Seven was vacant but the bed was tumbled and the water in the washbowl was still running out, and the door was still slamming, and the little front steps were still licking to the fast clip of high heels, and—

I hauled myself out of my cabin on a dead gallop and made a fast line for my car. I hit the car by leaping over the back deck of a low-slung roadster, clawed myself inside and wound up the turbine and let the old heap in gear all in one unbroken series of motions. The wheels spun and sent back a hail of gravel, then they took a bite out of the parking lot and the takeoff snapped my head back.

Both esper and eyesight were very busy cross-stitching a crooked course through the parking lot between the parked cars and the trees that were (I suppose) intended to lend the outfit a rustic atmosphere. So I was too busy to take more than a vague notice of a hand that clamped onto the doorframe until the door opened and closed again. By then I was out on the highway and I could relax a bit.

"Steve," she said, "Why do you do these things?"

Yeah, it was Marian Harrison. "I didn't ask to get shoved into this mess," I growled.

"You didn't ask to be born, either," she said.

I didn't think the argument was very logical, and I said so. "Life wasn't too hard to bear until I met you people," I told her sourly. "Life would be very pleasant if you'd go away. On the other hand, life is all I've got and it's far better than the alternative. So if I'm making your life miserable, that goes double for me."

"Why not give it up?" she asked me.

I stopped the car. I eyed her dead center, eye to eye until she couldn't take it any more. "Would you like me to just give up, Marian? Shall I please everybody by taking a bite of my hip-pocket artillery sights whilst testing the trigger pull with one forefinger? Or will it make everybody happy if I walk into the nearest reorientation museum blowing smoke out of my nose and claiming that I am a teakettle that's gotta be taken off the stove before I blow my lid?"

Marian's eyes dropped.

"Do you yourself really expect me to seek blessed oblivion?"

She shook her head slowly.

"Then for the Love of God, what do you expect of me?" I roared. "As I am, I'm neither flesh nor fish; just foul. I'm not likely to

give up, Marian. If I'm a menace to you and to your kind, it's just too tough. But if you want me out of your hair, you'll have to wrap me up in something suitable for framing and haul me kicking and screaming to your mind-refurbishing department. Because I'm not having any on my own. Understand?"

"I understand, Steve," she said softly. "I know you; we all know you and your type. You can't give up. You're unable to."

"Not when I've been hypnoed into it," I said.

Marian's head tossed disdainfully. "Thorndyke's hypnotic suggestion was very weak," she explained. "It could hardly be more if he was to plant the idea in such a way as to remain unidentified afterwards. No, Steve, your urge has always been your own personal drive. All that Thorndyke did was to point you slightly in our direction and give you a nudge. You did the rest."

"Well, you're a telepath. Maybe you're also capable of planting a post-hypnotic suggestion that I forget the whole idea."

"I'm not," she said with a sudden flare.

I looked at her. Not being a telepath I couldn't read a single thought, but it was certain that she was telling the truth, and telling it in such a manner as to be

convincing. Finally I said, "Marian, if you know that I'm not to be changed by logic or argument, why do you bother?"

FOR a full minute she was silent, then her eyes came up and gave it back to me with their electric blue. "For the same reason that Scholar Phelps hoped to use you against us," she said. "Your fate and your future is tied up with ours whether you turn out to be friend or enemy."

I grunted. "Sounds like a soap opera, Marian," I told her bitterly. "Will Catherine find solace in Phillip's arms; will Steve catch the Mekstrom's Disease? Will the dastardly Scholar Phelps——"

"Stop it!" she cried.

"All right. I'll stop as soon as you tell me what you intend to do with me now that you've caught up with me again."

She smiled. "Steve, I'm going along with you. Partly to play the telepath-half of your team. If you'll trust me to deliver the truth. And partly to see that you don't get into trouble that you can't get out of again."

My mind curled its lip. Pappy had tanned my landing gear until I was out of the habit of using mother for protection against the slingshots and bows-and-arrows of outrageous schoolchums. I'd not taken sanctuary behind a woman's

skirts since I was eight. So the idea of running under the protection of a woman went against the grain, even though I knew that she was my physical superior by no sensible proportion. Still, being cared-for physically by a dame of a hundred-ten—

"Eighteen."

— didn't sit well on me.

"Do you believe me, Steve?"

"I've got to. You're here to stay. I'm a sucker for a good-looking woman anyway, it seems. They tell me anything and I'm not hard-hearted enough to even indicate that I don't believe them."

She took my arm impulsively; then she let me go before she pinched it off at the elbow. "Steve," she said earnestly, "Believe me and let me be your——"

Better half? I finished sourly.

"Please don't," she said plaintively. "Steve, you've simply got to trust *somebody!*"

I looked into her face coldly. "The hardest job in the world for a non-telepath is to locate someone he can trust. The next hardest is to explain that to a telepath; because telepaths seldom want for trustworthy friends and therefore they can't see any difficulty in weeding out the non-trustworthy. Now——"

"You still haven't faced the facts."

"Neither have you, Marian. You

intend to go along with me, ostensibly to help me in whatever I intend to do. That's fine. I'll accept it. But you know damned good and well that I intend to carry on and on until something cracks. Now, tell me honestly, are you going along to help me crack something wide open, or just to be on deck to steer me into channels that will not result in a crack-up for your side of that damned fence?"

Marian Harrison looked down for a moment; I didn't need telepathy to know that I'd touched the sore spot. Then she looked up and said, "Steve, more than anything, I intend to keep you out of trouble. You should know by now that there is very little you can really do to harm either side of our own private little war."

And if I can't harm either side I can hardly do either side any good.

She nodded.

Yet I must be of some importance.

She nodded again. At that point I almost gave up. I'd been around this circle so many times in the past half-year that I knew how the back of my head looked.

All I knew was that something I had was important enough to both sides to make them keep me on the loose instead of erasing me and my nuisance value. So far as I could see, I was as useless to

either side as a coat of protective paint laid on stainless steel. I was immune to Mekstrom's Disease; not only the normal immunity of the usual human who might never come against a victim, but the immunity of one who has had everything tried on him that scholars of the disease could devise. About the only thing that ever took place was the sudden disappearance of everybody that I came in contact with.

Marian touched my arm gently. "You mustn't think like that, Steve," she said gently. "You've done enough useless self-condemnation. Can't you stop accusing yourself of some evil factor? Something that really is not so?"

Not until I know the truth." I replied. "I certainly can't dig it; I'm no telepath. Perhaps if I were, I'd not be in this awkward position."

A GAIN her silence proved to me that I'd hit a touchy spot. "What am I?" I demanded sourly. "Am I a great big curse? What the hell have I done, other than to be present just before several people turn up missing? Makes me sort of a male Typhoid Mary, doesn't it?"

"Now, Steve—"

"Well, maybe that's the way I feel. Sort of like everything I put my great big clutching hands on

turns dark green and starts to rot. Regardless of which side they're on, it goes one, two, three, four: Catherine, Thorndyke, You, Nurse Farrow. Or maybe you had it all along, and maybe Catherine, Thorndyke and Nurse Farrow were on the verge of catching it. Or maybe I turned up with a batting average of only Seven-fifty instead of a flat One-thousand because you already had it and couldn't catch it from me."

"Steve, what on Earth are you talking about?"

I smiled down at her in a crooked sort of quirk. "You, of course, have not the faintest idea of what I'm thinking."

"Oh, Steve——"

"And then again maybe you're doing your best to lead my puzzled little mind away from what you consider a dangerous subject?"

"I'd hardly do that——"

"Sure you would. I'd do it if our positions were reversed. I don't think it un-admirable to defend one's own personal stand, Marian. But you'll not divert me this time. I have a hunch that I am a sort of male Typhoid Mary. Let's call me old Mekstrom Steve. The carrier of Mekstrom's Disease, who like Typhoid Mary could transmit the malady without ever catching it. The old immune who either innocently or maliciously goes around handing it out to everybody

that comes into contact. Is that it Marian?"

"It's probably excellent logic, Steve. But it isn't true."

I eyed her coldly. "How can I possibly believe you?"

"That's the trouble," she said with a plaintive cry. "You can't. You've got to believe me on faith, Steve."

I smiled crookedly. "Marian," I said, "that's just the right angle to take. Since I cannot read your mind, I must accept the old appeal to the emotions. I must tell myself that Marian Harrison just simply could not lie to me for many reasons, among which is the old reason that people do not lie to blind men nor cause the cripple any hurt. Well, phooey. Whatever kind of gambit is being played here, it is bigger than any of its parts or pieces. I'm something between a queen and a pawn, Marian; a piece that can be sacrificed at any time to further the progress of the game. Slipping me a lie or two to cause me to move in some desired direction should come as a natural."

"But why would we lie to you?" she asked, and then she bit her lip; I think that she slipped, that she hadn't intended to urge me into deeper consideration of the problem lest I succeed in making a sharp analysis. After all, the way to keep people from figuring things

out is to stop them from thinking about the subject. That's the first rule. Next comes the process of feeding them false information if the First Law cannot be invoked.

"Why would you lie to me?" I replied in a sort of sneer. I didn't really want to sneer at her but it came naturally. "In an earlier age it might not be necessary."

"What?" she asked in surprise.

"Might not be necessary," I said. "Let's assume that we are living in the mid-Fifties, before Rhine. Steve Cornell turns up being a carrier of a disease that is really a blessing instead of a curse. In such a time, Marian, either side could sign me up openly as a sort of missionary; I could go around, the country innoculating the right people, those citizens who have the right kind of mind, attitude, or whatever-factor. Following me could be a clean-up corps to collect the wights who'd been innoculated by my contact. Sounds reasonable, doesn't it?" Without waiting for either protest or that downcast look of agreement, I went on: "But now we have perception and telepathy all over the place. So Steve Cornell, the carrier, must be pushed around from pillar to post, meeting people and innoculating them without ever knowing what he is doing. Because once he knows what he is doing, his usefulness is ended in this world of

Rhine Institute."

"Steve—" she started, but I interrupted again.

"About all I have to do now is to walk down any main street radiating my suspicions," I said bitterly. "And it's off to Medical Center for Steve—unless the Highways catch me first."

Very quietly, Marian said, "We really dislike to use reorientation on people. It changes them so—"

"But that's what I'm headed for, isn't it?" I demanded flatly.

"I'm sorry, Steve."

ANGRILY I went on, not caring that I'd finally caught on and by doing so had sealed my own package. "So after I have my mind ironed out smoothly, I'll still go on and on from pillar to post providing newly inoculated Mekstroms for your follow-up squad."

She looked up at me and there were tears in her eyes. "We were all hoping—" she started.

"Were you?" I asked roughly. "Were you all working to inoculate me at Homestead, or were you really studying me to find out what made me a carrier instead of a victim?"

"Both, Steve," she said, and there was a ring of honesty in her tone. I had to believe her, it made sense.

"Dismal prospect, isn't it?" I asked. "For a guy that's done

nothing wrong."

"We're all sorry."

"Look," I said with a sudden thought, "Why can't I still go on? I could start a way station of some sort, on some pretext, and go on inoculating the public as they come past. Then I could go on working for you and still keep my right mind."

She shook her head. "Scholar Phelps knows," she said. "Above all things we must keep you out of Scholar Phelps' hands. He'd use you for his own purpose."

"Hell!" I snarled. "He still will. Unless—"

"We'll have to keep you out of his hands," she said simply. "Just as we've managed to so far."

"With the difference that I'll not know what's going on?" I asked. "How long do you think my reoriented mind will go on in new ignorance?"

Marian did not answer that one and I got the idea. It was not to be any simple reorientation for Steve. It was going to be the works. I'd be a new man, completely. They'd graft new fingertips on me, they'd change my face with plastic surgery, they'd rework my think-tank. I'd be someone else. Reorientation is, I've felt for a long time, a sort of non-fatal suicide. But this sort of reorientation, while it is non-fatal according to the legal definition of

death, might as well be considered fatal.

This sort of thinking gets into philosophy, and it can and has been argued to a degree far beyond my ability to philosophize. But the answer, so far as I am concerned, stands with the answer to the question of exactly what is it in this lump of flesh that makes me Steve Cornell? Then granting that Steve Cornell will cease to be when the body ceases to live, can Steve Cornell be Steve Cornell when the intellect in this body is revised, amended, and completely changed? Or is the body so closely tied to the mind that no matter how the thinking is changed, there will remain some fragment of the mind?

Hell—you figure it out. I'm not enough interested in the outcome to offer myself for experiment in philosophy.

I said coldly, "Well, now that I've tipped over our old apple cart, are you going to take me in?"

"What else can I do, Steve?" she said unhappily.

I couldn't answer that. I just sat there looking at her and trying to remember that her shapely one-hundred and eighteen pounds were steel hard and monster strong and that she could probably carry me under one arm all the way to Homestead without breathing hard. I couldn't cut and run; she could

outrun me. I couldn't slug her on the jaw and get away because all I'd do was break my hand. The Bonanza .375 would probably work, but I have not the cold-blooded viciousness to pull a gun on a woman and drill her. I grunted sourly, that weapon had been about as useful to me as a stuffed bear or an authentic Egyptian Obelisk.

"Well, I'm not going," I said stubbornly.

She looked at me in surprise. "What are you going to do?" she asked me.

I felt a glow of self-confidence. If I could not run loose with guilty knowledge of my being a Mekstrom Carrier, it was equally impossible for anybody to kidnap me and carry me across the country. I'd radiate like mad; I'd complain about the situation at every crossroad, at every filling station, before every farmer. I'd complain mentally and bitterly, and sooner or later someone would get suspicious.

"Don't think like an idiot," she told me sharply. "You drove across the country before, remember? How many people did you convince?"

"I wasn't trying, then—"

"How about the people in the hotel in Denver?" she asked me pointedly. "What good did you do

there?"

Damned little, but—

"One of the advantages of a telepath is that we can't be taken by surprise," she informed me. "Because no one can possibly work without plans of some kind."

"One of the troubles of a telepath." I told her right back, "is that they get so confounded used to knowing what is going to happen next that it takes all the pleasant element of surprise out of their lives. That makes 'em dull and—"

The element of surprise came in through the back window, passed between us and went *Splat!* against the windshield. There was the sound like someone chipping ice with a spike followed by the distant bark of a rifle. A second slug came through the back window about the time that the first shapeless pancake, landed on the floor of the car. The second slug, not slowed by the shatterproof glass in the rear, went through the shatterproof glass in the front. A third slug passed through the same tunnel.

It was damned fine shooting; the guy had put three shots within a diameter no larger than a half dollar, shooting from a distance beyond my esper range.

These were warning shots. He'd missed us intentionally. He'd proved it by firing three times

through the same hole.

I wound up the machinery and we took off. Marian cried something about not being foolish, but her words were swept out through the hole in the rear window, just above the marks on the pavement caused by my tires as we spun the wheels.

CHAPTER XV

"**S**TEVE, stop it!" cried Marian as soon as she could get her breath.

"Nuts," I growled. I took a long curve on the outside wheels and ironed out again. "He isn't after our hide, honey. He's after our capture. I don't care for any."

The fourth shot went singing off the pavement to one side. It whined into the distance making that noise that sets the teeth on edge and makes one want to duck. I lowered the boom on the go pedal and tried to make the meter read off the far end of the scale; I had a notion that the guy behind might shoot the tires out if we were going slow enough so that a blowout wouldn't cause a bad wreck; but he probably would not do it once I got the speed up. He was not after Marian. Marian could probably walk out of any crackup without a bruise, but I couldn't.

We went roaring around a curve, I fought the wheel into a nasty

double 's' curve to swing out and around a truck, then back on my own side of the road again to avoid an oncoming car. I could almost count the front teeth of the guy driving the car as we straightened out with a coat of varnish to spare. I scared everybody in all three vehicles, including me.

Then I passed a couple of guys standing beside the road; one of them waved me on, the other stood there peering past me down the road. As we roared by, another group on the other side of the highway came running out hauling a big old hay wagon. They set the wagon across the road and then sloped into the ditch on either side of it.

I managed to dig the bare glimmer of firearms before I had to yank my perception away from them and slam it back on the road in front. I was none too soon, because dead ahead by a thousand feet or so, they were hauling a second road block out.

Marian, not possessed of esper, cried out as soon as she read this new menace in my mind. I rode the brakes easily and came to a stop long before we hit it. In back there sounded a crackle of rifle fire; in front, three men came out waving their rifles at us.

I whipped the car back, spun it in a seesaw, and took off back towards the first road block. Half

way back I whirled my car into a rough sideroad just as the left hand rear tire went out with a roar. The car sagged and dragged me to a stop with my nose in a little ditch. The heap hadn't stopped rocking yet before I was out and on the run.

"Steve!" cried Marian. "Come back!"

"To hell with it," I grunted and kept right on running. Before me by a couple of hundred yards was a thicket of trees; I headed that way as fast as I know how. I managed to sling a dig back; Marian was joining the others, she was pointing in my direction. One of them raised the rifle but she knocked it down.

I went on running. It looked as though I'd be all right so long as I didn't get in the way of an accidental shot. My life seemed once more charmed with the fact that no one wanted me dead.

The thicket of woods was not as thick as I'd have liked. From a distance they'd seemed almost impenetrable, but when I was running through them towards the center, they looked pitifully thin. I could see light from any direction and the floor of the woods was trimmed, the underbrush cleaned out, and a lot of it was tramped down.

Ahead of me I perceived a few of them coming towards the woods

warily, behind me there was another gang closing in. I began to feel like the caterpillar on the blade of grass in front of the lawn mower.

I tried to hide under a deadfall, knowing that it was poor protection against rifle fire. I hauled out the Bonanza and checked the cylinder. I didn't know which side I was going to shoot at, but that didn't bother me. I was going to shoot at the first side that got close.

A couple of shots whipped by over my head, making noises like someone snapping a bullwhip. I couldn't tell which direction they came from; I was too busy trying to stuff my feet into a gopher hole under my deadfall.

I cast around the thicket with my sense of perception and caught the layout. Both sides were spread out, stalking forward like infantry advancing through disputed ground. Now and then one of them would raise his rifle and fire at some unexpected motion. This, I gathered, was more nervousness than fighting skill, because no group of telepaths and/or perceptsives would be so jittery on the trigger if they weren't basically nervous. They should, as I did, have the absolute position of both their enemy and their own side.

WITH a growing nervous sweat I dug their advances. They

were avoiding my position, trying to encircle me by making long semicircular marches, hoping to get between me and the other side. This was a rough maneuver, sort of like two telepaths playing chess. Both sides knew to a minute exactly what the other had in mind, where he was, and what he was going to do about his position. But they kept shifting, feinting and counter-advancing, trying to gain the advantage of number or position so that the other would be forced to retreat. It became a war of nerves; a game of seeing who had the most guts; who could walk closer to the muzzle of an enemy rifle without getting hit.

Their rifles were mixed; there were a couple of deer guns, a nice 35-70 Express that fired a slug slightly smaller than a pantella cigar, a few shotguns, a carbine sports rifle that looked like it might have been Garand with the barrel shortened by a couple of inches, some revolvers, one nasty-looking Colt .45 Automatic, and so on.

I shivered down in my little hide-out; as soon as the shooting started in earnest, they were going to clean out this woods but good. It was going to be a fine barrage, with guns going off in all directions, because it is hard to keep your head in a melee. Esper and telepathy sort of go by the board when shooting starts.

I still didn't know which side was which. The gang behind me were friends of Marian Harrison; but that did not endear them to me any more than knowing that the gang in front were probably from Scholar Phelps' Medical Center or some group affiliated with him. In the midst of it, I managed to bet myself a new hat that old Scholar Phelps didn't really know what was going on. He would be cagey enough to stay ignorant of any overt strife or anything else that could be laid at his door.

Then on one edge of the woodsy section, two guys of equal dam-fool-factor advanced, came up standing, and faced one another across fifty feet of open woods. Their rifles came up and yelled at one another like a string of firecrackers; they wasted a lot of power and lead by not taking careful aim. One of them emptied his rifle and started to fade back to reload, the other let him have it in the shoulder. It spun the guy around and dumped him on his spine. His outflung hand slammed his rifle against a tree, which broke it.

He gave a painful moan and started to crawl back, his arm hanging limp-like but not broken. From behind me came a roar and a pattering of shotgun pellets through the trees; it was answered by the heavy bark of the 35-70 Express.

I'm sure that in the entire artillery present, the only rifle heavy enough to really do damage among these Mekstroms was that Express, which would actually stop a charging rhino. When you get down to facts, my Bonanza .375 packed a terrific wallop but it really did not have the shocking power of the heavy big-game rifle.

Motion caught my perception to one side; two of them had let go shotgun blasts from single-shot guns. They were standing face to face swinging their guns like a pair of axemen: swing, chop! Swing, chop! and with each swing their guns were losing shape, splinters from the butts, and bits of machinery. Their clothing was in ribbons from the shotgun blasts. But neither of them seemed willing to give up. There was not a sign of blood; only a few places on each belly that looked shiny-like. On the other side of me, one guy let go with a rifle that slugged the other bird in the middle. He folded over the shot and his middle went back and down, which slapped his head over and back and down where it hit the ground with an audible thump. The first guy leaped forward just as the victim of this attack sat up, rubbed his belly ruefully, and drew a hunting knife with his other hand. The first guy took a running dive at the supine one, who swung the hunting knife in a vicious arc.

The point hit the chest of the man coming through the air but it stopped as though the man had been wearing plate armor. You could dig the return shock that stunned the knife-wielder's arm when the point turned. All it did was rip the clothing. Then the pair of them were at it in a free-for-all that made the woods ring. This deadly combat did not last long. One of them (I lost track of which was which in the mad mangle) took aim with a fist and let the other have it. The rifle shot hadn't stopped him (I got track of which was which after they stopped going around and around) but the hard fist of another Mekstrom laid him out colder than a mackerel, iced for shipment.

THE deadly 35-70 Express roared again, and there started a concentration of troops heading towards the point of origin. I had a hunch that the other side did not like anybody to be playing quite as rough as a big game gun. Someone might really get hurt.

By now they were all in close and swinging; now and then someone would stand off and gain a few moments of breathing space by letting go with a shotgun or knocking someone off of his feet with a carbine. There was some bloodshed, too; not all these shots bounced. But from where I was,

none of them were fatal. Just painful. The guy who'd stopped first the rifle slug and then the other Mekstrom's fist was still out cold and bleeding lightly from the place in his stomach. A bit horrified, I dug it and found that the pellet was imbedded in his hide about a half-inch in. The two birds who'd been hacking at one another with the remains of their shotguns had settled it barehanded, too. The loser was groaning and trying to pull himself together. The shiny spots on his chest were shotgun pellets stuck in his skin.

It was one hell of a fight.

It was also one hell of a place for a normal human being. Mekstroms could play with guns and knives and go around taking swings at one another with hunks of tree or bludgeons or clubbed rifles, or they could stand off and hurl boulders. But such a battlefield was no place for a guy named Steve Cornell.

By now all good sense and fine management was gone. If I'd been spotted, they'd have taken a swing at me, forgetting that I am no Mekstrom.

But sooner or later they would spot me, and so I decided that it was time for Steve to leave.

I cast about me with my perception; the gang that Marian had joined had advanced until they were almost even with my central

position; there were a couple of swinging matches to either side and one in front of me. I wondered about Marian; somehow I still don't like seeing a woman tangled up in a free-for-all. Marian was out of esper range, which was all right with me.

I crawled out of my hideout cautiously, stood up in a low stoop, and began to run. A couple of them caught sight of me and put up a howl, but they were too busy with their personal foe to take off after me. One of them was free; I doubled him up and dropped him on his can with a slug from my Bonanza .375. Somehow it did not seem rough or vicious to shoot since there was nothing lethal in it. It was more like a game of cowboy and indian than a deadly earnest bit of warfare.

Then I was out and free of them all, out of the woods and running like a deer. I cursed the car with its blown out tire; the old crate had been a fine bus, nicely broken in and conveniently fast. But it was as useful to me now as a pair of skis.

A couple of them behind me caught on and gave chase. I heard cries for me to stop, which I ignored like any sensible man. Someone cut loose with a roar; the big slug from the Express whipped past and went *Spang!* off a rock somewhere ahead.

It only added a few more feet per second to my flight. If they were going to play that rough, I didn't care to stay.

I fired an unaimed shot over my shoulder, which probably did no good at all except for lifting my morale. I hoped that it would slow them a bit, but if it did I couldn't tell. Then I leaped over a ditch and came upon a cluster of cars. I dug at them as I approached and selected one of the faster models that still had its key dangling from the lock.

I was in and on and away as fast as a scared man can move. They were still yelling and fighting in the woods when I raced out of range.

THE heap I'd jumped was a Clinton Special with rocklike springs and a low slung frame that hugged the ground like a clam. I was intent upon putting as many miles as I could between me and the late engagement in as short a time as possible, and the Clinton seemed especially apt until I remembered that the figure 200 on the dial meant kilometers instead of miles per hour. Then I let her out a bit more and tried for the end of the dial. The Clinton tried with me, and I had to keep my esper carefully aimed at the road ahead because I was definitely overdriving my eyesight and reac-

tion-time.

I was so intent upon making feet that I did not have anything left to dig my surroundings. So I did not see nor dig the jetcopter that came swooping down over my head until the howl of its vane-jets raised hell with my eardrum. Then I slowed and lifted my perception at the same time for a quick dig.

It was enough.

The jetcopter was painted a beautiful Policeman Blue and it sported a large goldleaf star on its hide, and inside the cabin were two hard-faced gentlemen wearing uniforms with brass buttons and that Old Bailey look in their eye. The one on the left was jingling a pair of handcuffs.

They passed over my head at about fifteen feet, swooped on by a thousand, and dropped a road-block bomb. It flared briefly and let out with a billow of thick red smoke.

I leaned on the brakes hard enough to stand the Clinton up on its nose, because if I shoved my front bumper through that cloud of red smoke it was signal for them to let me have it. I came to a stop about a foot this side of the bomb, and the jetcopter came down hovering. Its vanes blew the smoke away and the 'copter landed in front of my swiped Clinton Special.

The policeman was both curt and angry. "Driver's ticket, registration, and maybe your pilot's license, buster," he snapped.

Well, that was *it*. I had a driver's ticket all right, but it did not permit me to drive a car that I'd selected out of a group willy nilly. The car registration was in the glove compartment where it was supposed to be, but what it said did not match what the driver's license claimed. No matter what I said, Hell was out for lunch.

"I'll go quietly, officer," I told him.

"Damn' white of you, pilot," he said cynically. He was scribbling on a book of tickets and it was piling up deep. Speeding, reckless driving, violating of ordinance something-or-other by number. Driving a car without proper registration in the absence of the rightful owner (Check for stolen car records) and so on and on and on until it looked like a life term in the local jug.

"Move over, Cornell," he said curtly. "I'm taking you in."

I moved politely. The only time it pays to be arrogant with the police is long after you've proved them wrong, and then only when you're facing your mirror at home telling yourself what you should have said. Even then it is not a good idea.

I was driven to court; escorted in by the pair of them and seated with one on each side. The sign on the judge's table said: Magistrate Hollister.

Magistrate Hollister was an elderly gentleman with a cast iron jaw and a glance as cold as a bucket of carbon dioxide snow. He dealt justice with a sharp-edged shovel and his attitude seemed to be that everybody was either guilty as charged or was contemplating some form of evil to be committed as soon as he was out of the sight of Justice. I sat there squirming while he piled the top on a couple whose only crime was parking overtime; I itched from top to bottom while he slapped one miscreant in the goal for turning left in violation of City Ordinance something-or-other. His next attempt gave a ten dollar fine for failing to come to a full and grinding halt with a total shift of gears at the sign of the big red light. Despite the fact that the criminal was esper to a fine degree and dug the fact no cross-traffic was evident for a half mile, a slow-down to a mere crawl was not within the legal definition of a full and complete stop.

Then His Honor licked his chops and called my name.

He speared me with an icicle-eye and asked sarcastically: "Well, Mr. Cornell, what form of sophistry are you going to employ to explain

your recent violations?"

I blinked.

He aimed a cold glance at the bailiff, who arose and read off the charges against me in a deep, hollow intonation.

"Speak up!" he snapped. "Are you guilty or not guilty?"

"Guilty," I admitted.

He beamed evilly. A sort of self-righteous evil. It was easy to see that never in his tenure of office as a magistrate had he ever encountered as hardened and as vicious a criminal as I. Nor one who admitted to his turpitude so blandly. I felt it coming, and it made me itch, and I knew that if I tried to scratch His Honor would take the act as a personal affront. I fought down the crazy desire to scratch everything I could reach and it was hard; about the time His Honor added a charge of endangering human life on the highway to the rest of my assorted crimes, the itch had localized into the ring finger of my left hand. That I could scratch by rubbing it against the seam of my trousers.

Then His Honor went on, delivering Lecture Number Seven on Crime, Delinquency, and Grand Larceny. I was going to be an example, he went on and on. I was assumed to be esper since no normal—that's the word he used, which gave me the notion that the old bird was a blank and hated

everybody who wasn't— human being would be able to drive as though he had eyes mounted a half mile in front of him. Not that my useless life was in danger, or that I was actually not-in-control of my car, but that my actions made for panic among normal — again he used it!— people who were not blessed with either telepathy or perception by a mere accident of birth. The last one proved it; it was not accident of birth so much as it was training properly, to my way of thinking. So Magistrate Hollister hated psi-trained people and was out to make examples of them.

He polished off this lecture by pronouncing sentence: “—and the Law provides punishment by a fine not to exceed one thousand dollars, or a sentence of ninety days in jail— or Both.” He rolled the latter off as though he relished the sound of the words.

I waited, impatiently. The itch on my finger increased; I flung a fast dig at it but there was nothing there but Sophomore's Syndrome. Good old nervous association. It was the finger that little Snoodles, the three-month baby supergirl had munched to a farethewell. Damned good thing the kid didn't have teeth! But I was old Steve, the immune, the carrier, the—

“Well, Mr. Cornell?”

I blinked. “Yes, your honor?”

“Which will it be? I am granting you the leniency of selecting which penalty you prefer.”

I could probably rake up a thousand by selling some stock, personal possessions, and draining my already-weakened bank account. The most valuable of my possessions was parked in a ditch with a blowout and probably a bent frame and even so, I only owned about six monthly payments worth of it.

“Your Honor, I will prefer to pay the fine— if you'll grant me time in which to go and collect—”

He rapped his desk with his gavel. “Mr. Cornell,” he boomed angrily, “A thief cannot be trusted. Within a matter of minutes you could remove yourself from the jurisdiction of this court unless a binding penalty is placed against your person. You may go on your search for money, but only after posting bond— to the same amount as your fine!”

Lenient—?

“However, unless you are able to pay, I have no recourse but to exact the prison sentence of ninety days. Bailiff— !”

I gave up. It even felt sort of good to give up, especially when the turn is called by someone too big to be argued with. No matter what, I was going to take ninety days off, during which I could sit

and think and plan and wonder and chew my fingernails.

The itch in my finger burned again, deep this time, and not at all easy to satisfy by rubbing it against my trousers. I picked at it with the thumbnail and the nail caught something hard.

I looked down at the itching finger and sent my perception into it with as much concentration as I could.

My thumbnail had lifted a tiny circle no larger than the head of a pin. Blood was oozing from beneath the lifted rim, and I nervously picked off the tiny patch of hard, hard flesh and watched the surfaced blood well out into a tiny droplet. My perception told me the truth: It was Mekstrom's Disease and not a doubt. The Immune had caught it!

The bailiff tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Come along, Cornell!"

And I was going to have ninety days to watch that patch grow at the inexorable rate of about a sixty-fourth of an inch per hour!

CHAPTER XVI

THE Bailiff repeated, "Come along, Cornell." Then he added sourly, "Or I'll have to slip the cuffs on you."

I turned with a helpless shrug. I'd tried to lick 'em and I'd tried

to join 'em and I'd failed both. Then, as of this instant when I might have been able to go join 'em, I was headed for the wrong side as soon as I opened my big yap. And if I didn't yelp, I was a dead one anyway. The other, last end-point of this awkward situation occurred to me, too: That sooner or later someone in the local jug would latch on to my condition and pack me off to Scholar Phelps Medical Center anyway.

Once more I was in a situation where all I could do was to play this by ear, wait for a break, and see if I could make something out of it.

But before I could take more than a step or two toward the big door, someone in the back of the courtroom called out:

"Your Honor, I have some vital information in this case."

His Honor looked up across the court with a great amount of irritation showing in his face. His voice rasped, "Indeed?"

I whirled, shocked. It was Dr. Thorndyke.

Suavely, Dr. Thorndyke strode down the aisle. He faced the judge and explained who he was and why, then he backed it up with a wallet full of credentials, cards, identification, and so forth. The judge looked the shebang over sourly but finally nodded agreement. Thorndyke smiled self-con-

fidently and then went on, facing me:

"It would be against my duty to permit you to incarcerate this miscreant," he said smoothly. "Because Mr. Cornell has an incipient case of Mekstrom's Disease."

Everybody faded back and away from me as though he'd announced me to be the carrier of plague. They looked at me with horror and disgust on their faces, a couple of them began to wipe their hands with handkerchiefs; one guy who'd been standing where I'd dropped my patch of Mekstrom Flesh backed out of that un-charmed circle. Some of the spectators left hurriedly.

His Honor paled. "You're certain?" he demanded of Dr. Thorndyke.

"I'm certain. You'll note the blood on his finger; Cornell recently picked off a patch of Mekstrom Flesh no larger than the head of a pin. It was his first sign." The doctor went on explaining, "Normally this early seizure would be difficult to detect, except from a clinical examination. But since I am telepath and Cornell has perception, his own mind told me that he was aware of his sorry condition. One only need read his mind, or to dig at the tiny, bit of Mekstrom Flesh that he dropped to your floor."

The judge eyed me nastily. "Maybe I could add a charge of

contaminating a courtroom," he muttered. He was running his eyes across the floor from me to wherever I'd been, trying to locate the little patch. The rest of the court faded back from me still farther. I could hardly have been less admired if I'd been made of pure cyanide gas.

The judge rapped his gavel sharply. "I parole this prisoner in the custody of Dr. Thorndyke, who as a representative of The Medical Center will remove the prisoner to that place where the proper treatment awaits him."

"Now see here—" I started. But His Honor cut me off.

"You'll do as I say," he snapped. "Unfortunately, the Law does not permit me to enjoy any cruel or unusual punishments, or I'd insist upon your ninety day sentence and watch you die painfully. I— Bailiff! Remove this menace before I forget my position here and find myself in contempt of the Law I have sworn to uphold. I cannot be impartial before a man who contaminates my Court with the world's most dangerous disease!"

I turned to Thorndyke. "All right," I grunted. "You win."

He smiled again; I wanted to wipe that smile away with a set of knuckles but I knew that all I'd get would be a hand broken against Thorndyke's stone hard flesh. "Now, Mr. Cornell," he said with

that clinical smoothness, "let's not get the old standard attitude."

"Standard attitude?" I yelled.

"Nearly everybody who contracts Mekstrom's Disease," he said to the judge, "takes on a persecution complex as soon as he finds out that he has it. Some of them have even accused me of fomenting some big fantastic plot against them, alone. Please, Mr. Cornell," he went on facing me, "We'll give you the best of treatment that Medical Science knows."

"Yeah," I grunted.

His Honor rapped on the gavel once more. "Officer Gruenwald," he snapped, "You will accompany the prisoner and Dr. Thorndyke to The Medical Center at Marion Indiana and having done that you will return and report to me that you have accomplished your mission."

Then the judge glared around, rapped once more, and cried, "Case Finished. Next Case!"

I felt almost as sorry for the next guy coming in after all this as I felt for myself. His Honor was going to be one tough baby for some days to come. As they escorted me out, a janitor came in and began to swab the floor where I'd been standing. He was using something nicely corrosive that made the icy, judicial eyes water, all of which discomfort was likely to be added to the next lawbreaker's

sorry lot.

I was in fine company. Thorndyke was a telepath and Officer Gruenwald was perceptive. They went as a team and gave me about as much chance to escape as if I'd been a horned toad sealed in a cornerstone. Gruenwald, of course, treated me as though my breath was deadly, my touch foul, and my presence evil. In Gruenwald's eyes, the only difference between me and Medusa the Gorgon was that looking at me did not turn him to stone. He kept at least one eye on me almost constantly.

I could almost perceive Thorndyke's amusement. With the best of social amenities, he could hardly have spent a full waking day in the company of either a telepath or a perceptive without giving away the fact that he was Mekstrom. But with me to watch over, Officer Gruenwald's mental attention was not to be turned aside to take an impolite dig at his companion. Even if he had, Thorndyke would have been there quickly to turn his attention aside.

I've read the early books that contain prediction of how we are supposed to operate. The old boys seemed to have the quaint notion that a telepath should be able at once to know everything that goes on everywhere, and a perceptive should be aware of everything ma-

terial about him. There should be no privacy. There was to be no defense against the digging tom.

It ain't necessarily so. If Gruenwald had taken a dig at Thorndyke's hide, the doctor would have powered the policeman with a cold, indignant eye and called him for it. Of course, there was no good reason for Gruenwald to take a dig at Thorndyke and so he didn't.

So I went along with the status quo and tried to think of some way to break it up.

An hour later I was still thinking, and the bleeding on my finger had stopped. Stopped because the Mekstrom Flesh had covered the raw spot over with a thin, stone-hard plate that could not be separated visually from the rest of my skin.

"As a perceptive," observed Dr. Thorndyke in a professorial tone, "you'll notice the patch of infection growing on Mr. Cornell's finger. The rate of growth seems normal; I'll have to check it accurately once I get him to the clinic. About a half millimeter per hour; roughly a sixty-fourth of an inch per hour in common terms, officer."

"I'm not familiar with the metric system that well," admitted the policeman.

THORNDYKE nodded absently. "A half millimeter is

about five thousandths of an inch larger than a sixty-fourth," he said. "In fifty or sixty hours, Mr. Cornell's finger will be solid to the first joint. In ninety days his arm will have become as solid as the arm of a marble statue."

I interjected, "And what do we do about it?"

He moved his head a bit and eyed me in the rear view mirror. "I hope we can help you, Cornell," he said in a tone of sympathy that was definitely intended to impress Officer Gruenwald with his medical appreciation of the doctor's debt to humanity. "I sincerely hope so. For in doing so, we will serve the human race. And," he admitted with an entirely human-sounding selfishness, "I may be able to deliver a thesis on the cure that will qualify me for my scholarship."

I took a fast stab: "Doctor, how does my flesh differ from yours?"

Thorndyke parried this attention-getting question: "Mine is of no consequence. Dig your own above and below the line of infection, Cornell. If your sense of perception has been trained fine enough, dig the actual line of infection and watch the molecular structure rearrange. Can you dig that fine, Officer? Cornell, I hate to dwell at length upon your misfortune, but perhaps I can help you face it by bringing the facts to

light."

Like hell you hate to dwell, Doctor Mekstrom!

In the rear view mirror, his lips parted in a snarling smile and one eyelid drooped in a knowing wink.

I opened my mouth to make another stab in the open but Thorndyke got there first. "Officer Gruenwald," he suggested, "You can help by putting out your perception along the road ahead and seeing how it goes. I'd like to make tracks with this crate."

Gruenwald nodded.

Thorndyke put the goose-pedal down and the car took off with a howl of passing wind. He said with a grin, "It isn't very often that I get a chance to drive like this, but as long as I've an officer with me—"

He was above one forty by the time he let his voice trail off.

I watched the back of their heads for a moment. At this speed, Thorndyke would have both his mind and his hands full and the cop would be digging as far ahead as his perception could dig a clear appreciation of the road and its hazards. Thorndyke's telepathy would be occupied in taking this perception and using it. That left me free to think.

I cast a dig behind me, as far behind me as my perception would reach. Nothing.

I thought furiously. It resulted in

nothing.

I needed either a parachute or a full set of Mekstrom Hide to get out of this car now. With either I might have taken a chance and jumped. But as it was, the only guy who could walk away from any kind of scramble out of this car, was Dr. James Thorndyke.

I caught his drooping eyelid in the rear view mirror again and swore at him under my breath.

Time, and miles, went past. One after the other, sort of, and very fast. We hissed through towns where the streets had been opened for us and along stretches of highway and between cars and trucks running at normal speeds. One thing I must say for Thorndyke: He was almost as good a driver as I am.

MY second arrival at The Medical Center was rather quiet. I went in the service entrance, so to speak, and didn't get a look at the enamelled blonde at the front portal. They whiffed me in at a broad gate that was opened by a flunky and we drove for another mile through the grounds far from the main road. We ended up in front of a small brick building and as we went through the front office into a private place, Thorndyke told a secretary that she should prepare a legal receipt for my person. I did not like being bandied about like a

hunk of merchandise, but nobody seemed to give a damn what I thought. It was all very fast and efficient. I'd barely seated myself and lit a cigarette when the nurse came in with the document which Thorndyke signed, she witnessed, and was subsequently handed to Officer Gruenwald.

"Is there any danger of me—er—contracting—" he faltered uncertainly to Dr. Thorndyke.

"You'll notice that—" I started to call attention to Thorndyke's calmness at being in my presence and was going to invite Gruenwald to take a dig at the doctor's hide, but once more the doctor blocked me.

"None of us have ever found any factor of contagion," he said. "And we live among Mekkstrom Cases. You'll notice Miss Clifton's lack of concern."

Miss Clifton, the nurse, turned a calm face to the policeman and gave him her hand. Miss Clifton had a face and a figure that was enough to make a man forget anything. She knew her part very well; together, the nurse and the policeman left the office and I wondered just why a non-Mekkstrom would have anything to do with an outfit like this.

Thorndyke smiled and said, "I won't tell you, Steve. What you don't know won't hurt anybody."

"Mind telling me what I'm slated

for? The high jump? Going to watch me writhing in pain as my infection climbs toward my vitals? Going to amputate? Or are you going to cut it off inch by inch and watch me suffer?"

"Steve, some things you know already. One, that you are a carrier. There have been other carriers. We'd like to know what makes you a carrier."

The laboratory again? I thought.

He nodded. "Also whether your final contraction of Mekkstrom's Disease removes the carrier-factor."

I said hopefully, "I suppose as a Mekkstrom I'll eventually be qualified to join you?"

Thorndyke looked blank. "Perhaps," he said flatly.

To my mind, that flat *perhaps* was the same sort of reply that Mother used to hand me when I wanted something that she did not want to give. I'd been eleven before I got walloped across the bazoo by pointing out to her that *we'll see* really meant *no*, because nothing that she ever said it to ever came to pass.

"Look, Thorndyke, let's take our shoes off and stop dancing," I told him. "I have a pretty good idea of what's been going on. I'd like an honest answer to what's likely to go on from here."

"I can't give you that."

"Who can?"

He said nothing, but he began to look at me as though I weren't quite bright. That made two of us, I was looking at him in the same manner. It must have made quite an interesting picture; two grown men eyeing one another with contempt for each other's mental processes. It was just the same sort of attitude that starts fights in bars, quarrels in the home, or world wars.

My finger itched a bit, saving the situation. I'd been about to forget that Thorndyke was a Mekstrom and take a swing at him. Such oversights also start wars.

He laughed at me cynically. "You're in a very poor position to dictate terms," he said sharply.

"All right," I agreed reluctantly. "So I'm a prisoner. I'm also under a sentence of death. Don't think me unreasonable if I object to it."

He sat down and took a cigarette from the box on the desk. "Steve," he said, "we don't like it either."

I held up my hand and looked at the finger pointedly. "You're alive. You've been through the so-called cure. In some manner entirely unknown to me, this cure can be bought—"

"No it can't. Be bought, that is."

I grunted nastily. "Then if it can't be bought, I have nothing to fear, have I? It's free, of course."

"Not entirely."

I sneered at him. "It's not for sale and it's not for free. That defines it better. This cure, then, must be some sort of largess, benevolently bestowed upon the worthy by some megalomaniac who considers himself—"

"Now hold on, Steve!" snapped the doctor. "You can't talk—"

"I am talking like that," I snapped back hotly. "I'm stuck with the touch of Mekstroms. My life is just as sweet to me as your life is to you. I want to know what's going to happen to me. Am I going to collect a benefit from this so-gracious lord of yours or am I going to die miserably as an example to prove that The Medical Center is still hoping to find a cure for Mekstroms?"

"The trouble with your thinking is that you expect all things to be black or white and so defined. You ask me, 'am I going to live or die?' and expect me to answer without qualification. I can only tell you that I don't know which. That it all depends."

"Depends upon exactly what?"

He eyed me with a cold stare. "Whether you're worthy of living."

"Who's to decide?"

"We will."

I grunted, wishing that I knew more Latin. I wanted to quote that Latin platitude about who watches the watchers to him. He watched

me narrowly, and I expected him to quote me the phrase after having read my mind. But apparently the implication of the phrase did not appeal to him and so he remained silent.

I broke the silence by saying, "What right has any man or collection of men to decide whether I, or anyone else, has the right to live or die?"

"It's done all the time," he replied succinctly.

"Yeah?"

"Criminals are—"

"I'm not a criminal; I've violated no man-made law. I've not even violated very many of the Ten Commandments. At least, none of the Ten that are punishable by death."

He was silent for a moment again, then he said, "Steve, you're the victim of loose propaganda."

"Who isn't?" I grunted sourly. "The entire human race is lambasted by one form of propaganda or another from the time the infant learns to sit up until the elderly lays down and dies. We're all guilty of loose thinking. My own father, for instance. Had to quit school before he could take any advanced schooling, had to fight his way up, had to collect his advanced education by study, application, and hard practice. He always swore that this long period of hardship strengthened his will and his char-

acter and gave him the guts to go out and do things that he'd never have thought of if he'd had an easy life. Then the old duck turns right around and swears that he'll never see any son of his take the bumps as he took them."

"That's beside the point, Steve. I know what sort of propaganda you've been listening to. It's the old do-good line; the everything for anybody line; the no man must die alone line."

"Is it bad?"

Dr. Thorndyke shrugged. "You've talked about loose propaganda," he said. "Well, in this welter of loose propaganda, every man had at least the opportunity of choosing which line of guff he intends to adhere to. I'm even willing to admit that there is both right and wrong on both sides. Are you?"

I stifled a sour grin. "I shouldn't, because it is a mistake in any political argument to even let on that the other guy is slightly more than an idiot. But as an engineer, I'll admit it."

"Now that's a help," he said more cheerfully. "You're objecting, of course, to the fact that we are taking the right to pick, choose, and select those people that we think are more likely to be of good advantage to the human race. You're listening to that old line

about the hypothetical catclysm that threatens the human race, and how would you choose the hundred people who are supposed to carry on. Well, have you ever eyed the human race in slightly another manner?"

"I wouldn't know," I told him. "Maybe."

"Have you ever watched, heard of, or read the proceedings of one of those big trials where some conkpot has blown the brains out of a half-dozen citizens by pointing a gun and emptying it at a crowd; or where some blue-beard-type has performed in a manner that is utterly antisocial? If you have, you've been appalled by the appearance of a couple of sob sisters and do-gooders who attempt—and in too many cases they do succeed—to show that the vicious character is off his toggle, or was momentarily nuts. We mustn't execute a nut, no matter how vicious a nut he is. We've got to protect him, feed him, and house him for the next fifty years. Now, not only is he doing Society absolutely no damned good while he's locked up for fifty years, he's also eating up his share of the standard of living. Then to top this off, so long as this son of a bitch is alive, there is the danger that some soft-hearted fathead will succeed in getting him turned loose once more."

"Agreed," I said. "But you're again talking about criminals, which I don't think applies in my case."

"No, of course not," he said quickly. "I used it to prove to you that this is one way of looking at a less concrete case. Carry this soft-headed thinking a couple of steps higher. Medical science has made it possible for the human race to dilute its strength. Epileptics are saved to breed epileptics; haemophiliacs are preserved, neurotics are ironed out, weaknesses of all kinds are kept alive to breed their strain of weakness. The poor have huge families because they haven't got the dough to buy contraceptives, nor perhaps the inclination to use them. The church—any church and all churches—object to contraceptives, claiming in at least one case that God admonished Adam and Eve to 'Be fruitful and replenish the Earth.' None of them will agree that with a population of about three and a half billion that we have followed the dictum and now we can look Him in the eye and tell we've done at least one job He asked us to do."

"Now," I observed bitterly, "we're getting both philosophical and too too religious."

"I'm not a religious man," he retorted.

"So what has this to do with me and my future?"

"Very much. I'm just trying to make you agree that among the three and a half billion people on this Earth, there are a lot of very nice, loyal, upstanding citizens that contribute absolutely nothing to the advancement of Humanity."

I saw now, where this was leading. Thorndyke was leading me in a direction opposite to the usual cry for people to help their fellow unfortunate. One side starts with the better off and works their way down. Thorndyke had started off with the unfortunate that deserved no help from anybody in his right mind and was working his way up to include people who, like you and me, may have done nothing notable to advance the level of humanity on whatever terms humanity needs advancing. It did give me to think. I couldn't help but agree with him that lice on the body politic should be exterminated instead of put in a box and fed at my expense until they died. A bird that murders his mother with an old ice skate or commits rape on a kid is of no use to humanity. That he may be running with a loose roller is of no consequence; it makes him even less useful to humanity. And, of course, I've heard criminologists and behaviorists both agree that anybody who commits murder is off his linoleum. Only a jellybrain urges Society that these nuts should be saved. But

I'd never heard this argument carried upward before, level by level to include people who have done nothing against the rest of their fellow-men except not-doing something concrete for Society.

Well, in my mind I came to one conclusion. Society cannot draw lines nor can it assume a static pose. It must flow in one direction or the other. And for my money, while I object to paying taxes to support some rattlehead for the rest of his natural life, I'd rather have it that way than to have someone start a trend of bopping off everybody who has not the ability to absorb the educational level of the scholar.

Because, if the trend turned upward instead of downward, that's where the dividing line would end.

Anarchy, at one end, is as bad as tyranny, at the other—

"I'm sorry you cannot come to a logical conclusion," said Dr. Thorndyke. "If you cannot see the logic of—"

I cut him off short. "Look, Doc," I snapped, "If you can't see where your line of thinking ends, you're in bad shape."

He looked superior. "You're sour because you know you haven't got what it takes."

I almost flipped. "You're so damned dumb that you can't see that in any society of supermen, you'd not even be qualified to clean

out the ash trays," I tossed back at him.

He smiled self-confidently. "By the time they start looking at my level—if they ever do—you'll have been gone long ago. Sorry, Cornell. You don't add up."

Well, that was nothing I didn't know already. In his society, I was a nonentity. Yet, somehow, if that's what the human race was coming to under the Thorndykes and the Phelps, I didn't care to stay around.

"All right," I snapped. "Which way do I go from here? The laboratory, or will you dispense with the preliminaries and let me take the high slide right now before this—" I held up my infected finger, "—gets to the painful stages."

With the air and tone of a man inspecting an interesting specimen impaled on a mounting pin, Thorn-dyke replied:

"Oh—we have use for the like of you."

CHAPTER XVII

IT would please me no end to report here that the gang at The Medical Center were crude, rough, vicious, and that they didn't give a good God-damn about human suffering. Unfortunately for my sense of moral balance, I can't. They didn't cut large slices out of my

hide without benefit of anaesthesia. They didn't take large samples or shove pipe-sized needles into me, or strap me on a board and open me up with dull knives. Instead, they treated me as if I'd been going to pay for my treatment and ultimately emerge from the Center to go forth and extoll its virtues. I ate good food, slept in a clean and comfortable bed, smoked free cigarettes, read the best magazines—and also some of the worst, if I must report the whole truth—and was permitted to mingle with the rest of the patients, guests, victims, personnel, and so forth that were attached to my ward.

I was not at any time treated as though I were anything but a willing and happy member of their team. It was known that I was not, and if any emotion was shown, it was the emotion of sympathy at my plight in not being one of them. This was shaded at about the same weight as any other accident of birth or up-bringing.

In my room, there was another man about my age. He'd arrived a day before me, with an early infection at the tip of his middle toe. He was, if I've got to produce a timetable, about three-eighths of an inch ahead of me. He had no worries. He was one of their kind of thinkers.

"How'd you connect?" I asked him.

"I didn't," he said, scratching his infected toe vigorously. "They connected with me."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I was sleeping tight and not even dreaming. Someone rapped on my apartment door and I growled myself out of bed and sort of felt my way. It was three in the morning. Guy stood there looking apologetic, 'Got a message for you,' he tells me. 'Can't it wait until morning?' I snarl back. 'No,' he says. 'It's important!' So I invite him in. He doesn't waste any time at all; his first act is to point at an iron floor lamp in the corner and ask me how much I'd paid for it. I tell him. Then, this bird drops twice the amount on the coffee table, strides over to the corner, picks up the lamp, and ties the iron pipe into a fancy-looking knot. He didn't even grunt. 'Mr. Mullaney,' he asks me, 'How would you like to be that strong?' I didn't have to think it over. I told him right then and there. Then we spent from three ayem to five thirty going through a fast question and answer routine, sort of like a complicated word-association test. At six o'clock I've packed and I'm on my way here with my case of Mekstrom's Disease."

"Just like that?" I asked Mr. Mullaney.

"Just like that," he repeated. "So now what happens?"

"Oh, about tomorrow I'll go in for treatment," he said. "Seems as how they've got to start treatment before the infection creeps to the first joint or I'll lose the joint." He contemplated me a bit; he was a perceptive and I knew it. "You've got another day or more. That's because your ring finger is longer than my toe."

"What's the treatment like?" I asked him.

"That I don't know. I've tried to dig the treatment, but it's too far away from here. This is just a sort of preliminary ward; I gather that they know when to start and so on." He veiled his eyes for a moment. He was undoubtedly thinking of my fate. "Chess?" he asked, changing the subject abruptly.

"Why not?" I grinned.

My mind wasn't in it. He beat me three out of four. I bedded down about eleven, and to my surprise I slept well. They must have been shoving something into me to make me sleep: I know me very well and I'm sure that I couldn't have closed an eye if they hadn't been slipping me the old closeout powder. For three nights, now, I'd corked off solid until seven ack emma and I'd come alive in the morning fine, fit, and fresh.

But on the following morning, Mr. Mullaney was missing. I never saw him again.

AT noon, or thereabouts, the end of the ring finger on my left hand was as solid as a rock. I could squeeze it in a door or burn it with a cigarette; I got into a little habit of scratching kitchen matches on it as I tried to dig into the solid flesh with my perception. I growled a bit, at my fate, but not much. After all, it was the same accident of birth that stopped my esper training a long way above the level of molecular structure that had also prevented me from thinking like a— well — a whatever handy label you happen to have for people like Scholar Phelps, Dr. Thorndyke, and the rest of the gang that ran The Medical Center.

It was about this time, too, that the slight itch began to change. You know how a deep-felt itch is. It can sometimes be a pleasant itch; the itch of being alive. The itch that comes after a fast swim in the salty sea and a dry-out in the bright sun, when the drying salt water makes your skin itch with the vibrant pleasure of just being alive. This is not the itch from the bite of any bug, but the kind of itch that makes you want to take another dive into the ocean instead of trying to scratch it with your claws. Well, the itch in my finger had been one of the pleasant kinds. It had been only mildly annoying, and I could sort of scratch it away by taking the steel-hard part of my

finger in my other hand and wiggle, briskly.

But now the itch turned into a deep burning pain.

My perception, never good enough to dig the finer structure clearly, was however good enough to tell me that my crawling horror had come to the boundary line of the first joint.

Now, medical gentlemen will probably have a lot of criticism of what I have to say about the joints of the fingers. I don't know, but I am guessing strongly that none of them will agree that there is a sharply defined surface which divides the first joint from the second. I'm not talking about the knuckle-bone joint; that demarcation is clear. What I mean is for the rest of the stuff; the meat, blood, fat, gristle, skin and all the rest of the composite parts that the medical profession endows with jaw-breaking Latin names so that we common herd are properly convinced of their high education.

Well, to my sense of perception, the spread of the Mekstrom infection seemed to pause as it reached this joint. About the only way I can think of the pause is to liken it to the advance of a victorious army that has reached a natural barrier like a broad river full of curves and wiggles. The infection reached this natural barrier in certain spots before it reached the barrier in other

spots; the first arrival stopped advancing and spread sidewise, obviously waiting until the later arrivals came to fill in the gap.

If the medical people are not in agreement as to which bit of the finger belongs to the first joint and which belongs to the second, they have only to watch — very carefully — a Mekstrom infection arriving at the joint. For once the first joint was solid, there was a perceptible pause.

It was this pause that was causing the burning pain.

And, according to what I'd been told, if someone didn't do something about me right now, I'd lose the end joint of my finger when someone did do something about it.

But nobody came to ease my pain, nor to ease my mind. They left me strictly alone. I spent the time from noon until three o'clock examining my fingertip as I'd not examined it before. It was rock hard, but strangely flexible if I could exert enough pressure on the flesh. It still moved with the flexing of my hands. (I learned later that there is nothing in the fingertip to prevent digital motion, since all the muscles and stuff that makes the fingers move are elsewhere in the arm.) The fingernail itself was like a chip of chilled steel. I could not flex the nail either with my other hand nor by biting it: between my teeth it had the uncomfortable solidity of a

sheet of metal that conveyed to my brain that the old teeth should not try to bite too hard. I tried prying on a bit of metal with the fingernail; inserting the nail in the crack where a metal cylinder had been formed to make a table leg. I might have been able to pry the crack wider, but the rest of my body did not have the power nor the rigidity necessary to drive the tiny lever that was my fingertip.

I wondered what kind of tool-grinder they used for a manicure.

AT three-thirty, the door to my room opened and in came Scholar Phelps, complete with his benign smile and his hearty air.

"Well," he boomed over-cheerfully, "We meet again, Mr. Cornell."

"Under trying circumstances," I said.

"Unfortunately so," he nodded. "However, we can't all be fortunate."

"I dislike being a vital statistic."

"So does everybody. Yet, from a philosophical point of view, you have no more right to live at the expense of someone else than someone else has a right to live at your expense. It all comes out even in the final accounting. And, of course, if every man were granted a guaranteed immortality, we'd have one hell of a cluttered-up world."

I had to admit that he was right,

but I still could not accept his statistical attitude. Not while I'm the statistic. He followed my thought even though he was *esper*; it wouldn't have been hard to follow anyway:

"All right, I admit that this is no time to sit around discussing philosophy or metaphysics or anything of that nature. What you are interested in is you."

"How absolutely correct."

"You know, of course, that you are a carrier."

"So I've come to believe, plus some confirmation. At least, everybody I seem to have any contact with either turns up missing or comes down with Mekstrom's—or both."

Scholar Phelps nodded. "You might have gone on for quite some time if it hadn't been so obvious."

I eyed him. "Just what went on?" I asked casually. "Did you have a clean-up squad following me all the time, picking up the debris? Or did you just pick up the ones you wanted? Or did the other outfit and their Highways make you indulge in a running competition?"

"Too many questions at once. Most of which answers would be best that you did not know. Best for us, that is. Maybe even for you."

I shrugged. "We seem to be bordering on philosophy again when the important point is what

you intend to do to me."

He looked unhappy. "Mr. Cornell, it is hard to remain un-philosophical in a case like this. So many avenues of thought have been opened, so many ideas and angles come to mind. We'll readily admit what you've probably concluded; that you as a carrier have become the one basic factor that we have been seeking for some twenty years and more. You are the dirigible force, the last brick in the building, the final answer. Or, and I hate to say it, were."

"Were?"

"For all of our knowledge of Mekstrom's we know so very little," he said. "In other maladies we know that in many cases the carrier is himself immune. In some we even observe that the carrier results from a low-level, incomplete infection with the disease which immunizes him but does not kill the bugs. In others, we've seen the carrier become normal after he has finally contacted the disease. What we must know now is: Is Steve Cornell, the Mekstrom Carrier, now a non-carrier because he has contracted the disease?"

"How are you going to find out?" I asked him.

"That's a problem," he said thoughtfully. "One school feels that we should not treat you, since the treatment itself may destroy whatever unknown factor makes you a

carrier. The other claims that if we don't treat you, you'll hardly live long enough to permit comprehensive research anyway. A third school believes that there is time to find out whether you are still a carrier, make some tests, and then treat you, after which these tests are to be repeated."

Rather bitterly, I said, "I suppose I have absolutely no vote."

"Hardly," his face was grim, but full of self-confidence.

"And to which school do you belong?" I asked sourly. "Do you want me to get the cure? Or am I to die miserably while you take tabs on my blood pressure, or do I merely lose an arm while you're sitting with folded hands waiting for the laboratory report?"

"In any case, we'll learn a lot about Mekstrom's from you," he said. "Even if you die."

As caustically as I could, I said, "It's nice to know that I am not going to die in vain."

He eyed me with contempt. "You're not afraid to die, are you, Mr. Cornell?"

That's a dirty question to ask any man. "Whether or not I'm afraid to die, and for good or evil, now or later, is beside the point. I have, obviously, nothing to say about the time, place, and the reasons."

"Ah, but if you had?" he asked suavely with a lift of his eyebrows.

"If I have any choice," I told him flatly, I'd prefer to die at the age of a hundred and four at the hands of a husband who had just cause for his jealous rage."

WE sat there and glanced at one another; he didn't know whether to laugh or snarl and I didn't care which he did. It seemed to me that he was leading up to something that looked like the end. Then I'd get the standard funeral and statements would be given out that I'd died because medical research had not been able to save me and blah blah blah complete with lack of funds and the Medical Center charity drive. The result of this would mean more moola for Phelps and higher efficiency for his operations, and to hell with the rest of the world.

"Let's get along with it," I snapped. "I've no opinion, no vote, no right of repeal. Why bother to ask me how I feel?"

Calmly he replied, "Because I am not a rough-shod, unhuman monster, Mr. Cornell. I would prefer that you see my point of view — or at least enough of it to admit that there is a bit of right on my side."

"Seems to me I went though that with Thorndyke."

"This is another angle. I'm speaking of my right of discovery."

"You're speaking of what?"

"My right of discovery. You as an engineer should be familiar with the idea. If I were a poet I could write an ode to my love and no one would forbid me my right to give it to her and to nobody else. If I were a cook with a special recipe no one could demand that I hand it over unless I had a special friend. He who discovers something new should be granted the right to control it. If this Mekstrom business were some sort of physical device or some new process, I could apply for a patent and have it for my exclusive use for a period of seventeen years. Am I not right?"

"Yes, but—"

"Except for the patent-office foul up, which has resulted in no patent being held valid for a good many years now. My patent would be infringed upon and I'd have no control—"

I stood up suddenly and faced him angrily. He did not cower; after all he was a Mekstrom. But he did shut up for a moment.

"Seems to me," I snarled, "That any process that can be used to save human life should not be held secret, patentable, or under the control of any one man or group."

"This is an argument that always comes up. You may, of course, be correct. But happily for me, Mr. Cornell, I have the process and you have not, and it is my own conviction that I have the right to use it

on those people who seem, in my opinion, to hold the most for the future advancement of the human race. However, I do not care to go over this argument again; it is tiresome and it never ends. As one of the ancient Greek philosophers observed, you cannot change a man's mind by arguing with him. The other fact remains, however, that you do have something to offer us despite your contrary mental processes."

"Do go on. What do I have to do to gain this benefit? Who do I have to kill?" I eyed him cynically and then added, "Or is it 'Whom shall I kill?'" I like these things to be proper, you know."

"Don't be sarcastic. I'm serious," he told me.

"Then stop pussyfooting and come to the point," I snapped. "You know what the story is. I don't. So if you think I'll be interested, why not tell me instead of letting me find out the hard way."

"You, of course, are a carrier. Or were. Maybe still are. We can probably find out. In fact, we'll have to find out, before we can—"

"For God's Sake stop it!" I yelled. "You're meandering."

"Sorry," he said in a tone of apology that surprised me all the way down to my feet.

He shook himself visibly and went on from there: "You, if still a carrier, can be of use to The Me-

dical Center. Now do you understand?"

Sure I understood. But good, As a normal human type, they held nothing over me and just sort of shoved me here and there and picked up the victims after me. But now that I was a victim myself, they could offer me their 'cure' if I would swear to go around the country deliberately infecting the people they wanted among them. It was that—or lie there and die miserably. This had not come to Scholar Phelps as a sudden flash of genius. He'd been planning this all along; had been waiting to pop this delicate question at the opportune moment. This was said moment of opportunity, after I'd been pushed around, had a chance to torture myself mentally, and was undoubtedly soft for anything that looked like salvation.

I'm not too-ashamed to admit that anything looked better than the painful death of a Mekstrom Victim. I'm a normal, honest citizen who has had the good luck never to be tempted by the chance to latch onto a half a million bucks with an hour's getaway time.

NATURALLY, it occurred to me that any contract signed under duress cannot be made to stand up in court. Under my present future, I would willingly swear to deliver my grandmother's left arm on

a platter, in return for getting me out of this sentence of death. Once cured I could renounce—

"There is one awkward point," said Scholar Phelps suavely. "Once we have cured you, we would have no hold on you other than your loyalty and your personal honor to fulfill a promise given. Neither of us are naive, Mr. Cornell. We both know that any honorable promise is only as valid as the basic honor involved. Since your personal opinion is that this medical treatment should be used indiscriminately, and that our program to better the human race by competitive selection is foreign to your feelings, you would feel honor-bound to betray us. Am I not correct?"

What could I say to that? First I'm out, then I'm in, now I'm out again. What the Hell was Phelps going at?

"If our positions were reversed, Mr. Cornell, I'm sure that you'd seek some additional binding force against me. I shall continue to seek some such lever against you for the same reason. In the meantime, Mr. Cornell, we shall make a test to see whether we have any real basis for any agreement at all. You might have ceased to be a carrier, you know."

"Yeah", I admitted darkly.

"In the meantime," he said cheerfully, "the least we can do is to treat your finger. I'd hate to

have you hedge a good deal because we did not deliver your cured body in the whole."

He put his head out of the door and summoned a nurse who came with a black bag. From the bag, Scholar Phelps took a skin-blast hypo and a small metal box, the top of which held a small slender, jointed platform and some tiny straps. He strapped my finger to this platform and then plugged in a length of line cord to the nearest wall socket. The little platforms moved; the one nearest my wrist vibrated rapidly across a very small excursion that tickled like the devil. The end platform moved in an arc, flexing the finger tip from straight to about seventy degrees. This went fairly slow but regularly up and down.

"I'll not fool you," he said drily. "This is going to hurt."

He set the skin-blast hypo on top of the joint and let it go. For a moment the finger felt cold, numb, pleasant. Then the shock wore away and the tip of my finger, my whole finger and part of my hand shocked me with the most excruciating agony that the hide of man ever felt. Flashes and waves of pain darted up my arm to the elbow and the muscles in my forearm jumped. The sensitive nerve in my elbow sang and sent darting waves of zigzag needles up to my shoulder. My hand was a source of searing

heat and freezing cold and the pain of being crushed and twisted and wrenched out of joint all at the same time.

Phelps wiped my wet face with a towel, loaded another hypo and let me have it in the shoulder. Gradually the stuff took hold and the awful pain began to subside. Not all the way, it just diminished from absolutely unbearable to merely terrible.

I knew at that moment how a trapped animal will bite off its own foreleg to get free of the trap.

From the depths of his bag he found a bottle and poured a half-tumbler for me; it went down like a whiskey-flavored soft drink. It had about as much kick as when you forget yourself and pour a drink of water into a highball glass that still holds a dreg of melted ice and diluted liquor. But it burned like fury once it hit my stomach and my mind began to wobble. He'd given me a slug of the pure quill, all right.

As some sort of counter-irritant, it worked. Very gradually the awful pain in my hand began to subside.

"You can take that manipulator off in an hour or so," he told me. "And in the meantime we'll get along with our testing."

I gathered that they could stop this treatment anywhere along the process if I did not measure up.

It was a fine future.

CHAPTER XVIII

MIDNIGHT. The manipulator had been off my hand for several hours, and it was obvious that my Mekstrom's was past the joint and creeping up towards the next. I eyed it with some distaste; as much as I wanted to have a fine hard body, I was not too pleased at having agony for a companion every time the damned infection crossed a joint. I began to wonder about the wrist; this is a nice complicated joint and should, if possible, exceed the pain of the first joint of the ring finger. I'd heard tell, of course, that the limit of pain cannot be exceeded (They measure pain in some unit called 'Dols' after the word *dolorous*) by which they mean that once you've reached the top, additional torture does not hurt any greater. I'd accepted this statement as it was printed. But now I was not too sure that what I'd just been through was not one of those exceptions that take place every now and then to the best of rules.

I was still in a dark and disconsolate mood. The slight consolation I had, that I'd not lose the end of my finger, was damned slight in view of the possible future in which the end of one finger meant nothing.

But I'd managed to eat, and I'd shaved and showered, and I'd hit the hay because it was as good a place to be as anywhere else. I could lie there and dig the premises with my esper.

There were very few patients in this building, and none were done up like the character in the Macklin place. They moved the cure-patients to some other part of the grounds when the cure started. There weren't very many nurses, doctors, scholars, and other personnel around, either. Along one side of a road was a small lighted house that was obviously a sort of guard, but it was casual instead of being formal and military in appearance. The grounds, instead of being patrolled by human guards (Which might have caused some comment) was carefully laid off into checkerboard squares by a complicated system of photobeams and induction bridges.

Since none of the physical gadgets would blow off at the probe of a sense of perception, I just went at it boldly.

If you've never been — detained — you've probably read about how the job of casing a joint should be done. I did it the same. I dug back and forth, collecting the layout from the back door of my building towards the nearest puff of dead area. This coign of safety billowed outward from the pattern towards

the building like an arm of a cumulus cloud and the top of it rose like a column to a height above my range. It sort of leaned forward but it did not lean far enough to be directly above the building. The far side of the column was just like the near side; this startled me even though I'm well practiced and well trained. It always startles me when I perceive the far side of a smallish dead area. I'm inclined like everybody else to consider perception on a line-of-sight basis instead of on a sort of all-around grasp. (It's this that makes reading difficult, you know. If you're not esper, try a book in front of a mirror and you'll get part of what I mean. Then add a dash of imagination and consider 'seeing' the book from all sides and knowing only that there is a blob of ink placed upon paper in a certain pattern).

I let my thinker run free. If I could direct a breakout from this joint with a lot of outside help, I'd have a hot pants jetcopter pilot come down the dead-area column with a dead engine. The Medical Center did not have any radar, probably on the proposition that too high a degree of security indicated a high degree of top-secret material to hide. So I'd come down dead engine, land and wait it out. Timing would have to be perfect, because I, the prisoner, would

have to make a fast gallop across a couple of hundred yards of wide open psi area, scale a tall fence topped with barbed wire, cross another fifty yards into the murk, and then find my rescuer. The takeoff would be fast once I'd located the 'copter in the murk, and everything would depend upon a hot-pants pilot who felt confident enough in his engine and his rotorjets to let 'em go with a roar and a lift without warmup.

During which time, unfortunately for all plans, the people at The Medical Center would have been reading my mind and would probably have that dead patch well patrolled with big, rough gentlemen armed with stuff heavy enough to stop a tank.

Lacking any fine coordination—or what is more important, some sort of device or doodad that would conceal my mind from prying telepaths—about the only thing I could do was to lay here in my soft bed and dream of making my escape. It was a pleasant dream. I'd made the big discovery that by inverting a wooden bucket over my head, my thoughts were barred from prying telepaths because wet wood stopped the passage of thought. I must have been dozing because this business of looking for some barrier, shield, screen, or the like had been a big research problem for years. Aside from the standard oddities of the psi-pattern across the

face of the Earth, no one had even slowed down the processes of the telepath and the perceptive.

I wondered whether I had the mental power to think as if I were dreaming, while acting as if I were awake.

I gave it up. Eventually I went to sleep.

ABOUT eight o'clock the next morning, there was a tentative tap on my door. While I was growling about why they should bother tapping, the door opened and a woman came in with my breakfast tray. She was not my nurse; she was the enamelled blonde receptionist.

She had lost some of her enamelled sophistication. It was not evident in her makeup, her dress, or her hair-do. These were perfection. In fact, she bore that store-window look that made me think of an automaton, triggered to make the right noises and to present the proper expression at the correct time. As though she had never had a thought of her own or an emotion that was above the level of very mild interest. As if the perfection of her dress and the characterless beauty of her face were more important than anything else in her life.

But the loss of absolute plate-glass impersonality was gone, and it took me some several moments

to dig it out of her appearance. Then I saw it. Her eyes. They no longer looked glassily out of that clear oval face at a point about three inches above my left shoulder, but they were centered on me from no matter what point in the room she'd be as she went about the business of running open the blinds, checking the this and that and the other that nurses' helpers check. Before, she'd put her eyes on me only from a dead ahead look. Now, when her head was turned, she rolled her eyes to keep me in sight.

Finally she placed my tray on the bed-table and stood looking down at me.

From my first meeting with her I knew she was no telepath, so I bluntly said, "Where's the regular girl? Where's my nurse?"

"I'm taking over for the time," she told me. Her voice was strained; she'd been trying to use that too-deeply cultured tone she used as the professional receptionist but the voice had cracked through the training enough to let some of her natural tone come through.

"Why?"

Then she relaxed completely, or maybe it was a matter of coming unglued. Her face allowed itself to take on some character and her body ceased being that rigid window-dummy type.

"What's your trouble—?" I

asked her softly. She had something on her mind that was a bit too big for her, but her training was not broad enough to allow her to get it out. I hoped to help, if I could. I also wanted to know what the hell she was doing here. If Scholar Phelps was thinking about putting a lever on me of the female type, he'd guessed wrong. I prefer the kind who don't mind having their hair mussed and their lipstick smeared and who—opposite to this frozen tomato—look upon life as a slight insult if someone doesn't muss them up very frequently.

Well, if she continued to act more human after every word of mine, she might make it in a couple of months. By now she was looking at me and I could see a fragment of fright in her face.

"Is it terrible?" she asked me in a whisper.

"Is what terrible?"

"Me— Mu — Mekstrom's D— Disease—" The last word came out with a couple of big tears oozing from closed lids.

"Why?" I asked. "And do I look all shot to bits?"

She opened the eyes and looked at me. "Does it hurt?"

I remembered the agony of my finger and tried to lie. "A little," I told her. "But I'm told that it was because I'd waited too long for my first treatment." I hoped that I was correct; maybe it was wishful

thinking, but if it was, I claim that right. I didn't want to go through the same agony every time we crossed a joint.

I reached over to the bedside table and found my cigarettes. I slipped two up and offered one of them to her. She put a tentative hand forward, slowly, a scared-to-touch reluctance in her motion. This changed as her hand came forward. It was the same sort of reluctance that you feel when you start out to visit the dentist for a roaring tooth. The closer you get to the dentist's office the less inclined you are to finish the job. Then at some indeterminate point you cross the place of no return and from that moment you go forward with increased determination.

She finally made the cigarette package but she was very careful not to touch my hand as she took out the weed. Then, as if she'd reached that point of no return, her hand slipped around the package and caught me by the wrist.

We were statue-still for three heartbeats. Then I lifted my other hand, took out the cigarette she'd missed, and held it forward for her. She took it. I dropped the pack and let my hand slip back until we were holding hands, practically. She shuddered.

I flipped my lighter and let her inhale a big puff before I put the

next question: "Why are you here and what the hell goes on?"

In a flat, dry voice she said, "I'm— supposed — to—" and let it trail away without finishing it.

"Guinea pig?" I blurted bluntly.

She collapsed like a deflated balloon. Next, she had her face buried in my shoulder, bawling like a hurt baby. I stroked her shoulder gently, but she shuddered away from my hand as though it were poison.

I shoved her upright and shook her a bit. "Damn it," I snapped. "Don't blubber like an idiot. Sit there and talk like a human being!"

It took her a minute of visible effort before she said, "You're supposed to be a— carrier. I'm supposed to find out—whether you are—a carrier."

Well, I'd suspected something of that sort. But what a hell of a lousy way to run a Medical Center. I've said before that I am anti-antivivisectionist; that before any medic takes a scalpel to my hide I want him to have had a lot of practice in cutting open dogs and cats and rabbits and monkeys and frogs and other forms of life. Then, of course, comes the next step: To try it on a human. But the human to try it on is some volunteer who is aware of the danger and the pain; one who is probably dedicated to medicine.

Not some young, innocent tomato who is scared to death.

Shakily she asked me, "How do I get it, Mr. Cornell?"

I eyed her sympathetically. There was a flush rising in her face now and her eyes were averted. I reached for her hand and pressed it gently. Then I got it; because she flushed deep as my hand touched hers.

"Look, Miss Questionmark, I don't know what you've been told, or whether your notion is something of your own construction. But let me put your mind at ease. Mekstrom's Disease is not contracted in bed. Nor, shall I add, upon a bed. Nor in the back seat of a parked car. I'm a carrier, but I assure you that I have not been roaring up and down the countryside having intercourse with every man and woman that crosses my path."

She stiffened, and then her face relaxed again. "I didn't know."

Why in the hell didn't they tell her? I thought sourly.

Then I held up my left hand and looked at the infection. This was the finger that had been gummed to bits by the Mekstrom infant back in Homestead. With a shrug of uncertainty, I lifted her hand to my mouth. I felt with my tongue and dug with my perception until I had a tiny fold of her skin between my front teeth. Then

sharply, I bit down, drawing blood. She jerked, stiffened, closed her eyes and took a deep breath but she did not cry out.

"That, if anything, should do it," I said flatly. "Now go out and get some iodine for the cut. Human-bite is likely to become infected with something bad. And I don't think antisepctic will hurt the Mekstrom Infection if it's taken place." They'd given me the antiseptic works in Homestead, I recalled. "Now, Miss Nameless, you sit over there and tell me how come this distressing tableau?"

"Oh— I can't," she cried. Then she left in a hurry sucking on her bleeding finger.

I didn't need any explanation; I'd just wanted my suspicions confirmed. Someone had a lever on her. Maybe someone she loved was a Mekstrom and her loyalty was extracted because of it. The chances were also high that she'd been given to understand that they'd accept her as a member if she ever caught Mekstrom's; and they'd taken my arrival as a fine chance to check me and get her at the same time.

I wondered about her; she was no big-brain. I couldn't quite see the stratified society outlined by Scholar Phelps as holding a position open for her in the top echelon. Except, of course and quite na-

turally, she was a woman, attractive if you like your women beautiful and dull-minded, and probably would be happy to live in a little vacuum-type world bounded on all sides with women's magazines, lace curtains, TV soap opera, and a corral full of little Mekstrom kids. I grinned. Funny how the proponents of the statified society always had their comeuppance by the need of women whose mind is bent on mundane things like homes and families.

Well, I hoped she caught it, if that's what she wanted. I was willing to bet my life that she cared a lot more for being with her man than she did for the cockeyed society he was supporting.

I finished my breakfast and went out to watch a couple of telepaths playing chess. I've never understood how they made a contest out of telepathic chess, even though I've been told. It had something to do with skill; that it takes a skilful player to tell a man exactly what you have in mind against him and then go ahead and do it despite all he can do against you. It works, obviously, but to my non-telepath mind I still feel that concealment of purpose is superior to advertised skill.

Anyway, I watched them until lunch time and then gave up. Telepathic chess was too much like playing perceptive poker. Just like playing "showdown" for the stake.

I ate lunch with the rest of the inmates of this museum in the main dining hall. Then after lunch came the afternoon full of laboratory tests, inspections, experiments, and so forth; they didn't do much that hadn't been tried at Homestead, and I surprised them again by being able to help in their never-ending blood counts and stuff of that sort.

They did not provide me with a new room mate, so I wandered around after dinner hoping that I could avoid both Thorndyke and Phelps. I didn't want to get into another fool social-structure argument with them and the affair of the little scared receptionist was more than likely to make me say a few words that might well get me cast into the Outer Darkness for their mere semantic content.

Once more I hit the sack early.

And, once more, there came a tap on my door about eight o'clock. It was not a tentative little frightened tap this time, it was more jovial and eager sounding. My reaction was about the same. Since it was their show and their property, I couldn't see any reason why they made this odd lip-service to politeness.

It was the receptionist again. She came in with a big wistful smile and dropped my tray on the bed table.

"Look," she cried. She held up

her hand. The bleeding had stopped and there was a thin film over the cut. I dug at it and nodded; it was the first show of Mekstrom Flesh without a doubt.

"That's it, kid."

"I know," she said happily. "Golly, I could kiss you!"

Then before I could think of all the various ways in which the word 'Golly' sounded out of character for her, she'd sort of launched herself into my arms and was busily erasing every attempt at logical thought with one of the warmest, no-holds-barred smoocheroo that I'd enjoyed for what seemed like years. It wasn't years since I'd held Catherine in my arms in her apartment just before we'd eloped, it just seemed like it. And since that last evening, I'd spent my time in the company of Nurse Farrow who held no emotional appeal to me, and the rest of femalekind I'd been in touch with had been Mekstroms whose handholding might twist off a wrist if they got a thrill out of it.

So I sort of let myself go and enjoy it.

But about the time I began to respond with enthusiasm and vigor, she extricated herself from my clutch and slid back to the foot of the bed out of reach.

A little breathlessly she said, "Harry will thank you for this." This meant the infection in her finger.

Then she was gone and I was thinking, *Harry should drop dead!*

Then I grinned at myself like the Cheshire Cat because I realized that I was so valuable a property that they couldn't afford to let me die. No matter what. I'd be kept alive. And after having things go so sour for so long a time, things were about to take a fast turn and go my way.

I discounted the baby-bite affair. Even if the baby were another carrier, it would take a long time before the kid was old enough to be trusted in his aim. You can never be sure which direction a two-year-old is going to bite, and it's hard enough to lead them there, let alone making them bite. I discounted it even more because I hadn't been roaring around the countryside biting the hell out of innocent citizens, any more than I'd been on a countryside sexorgy; Mere contact was enough; if the bite did anything, it may have hastened the process.

So here I was, a nice valuable property, with a will of my own. I could either throw in with Phelps and bite only Phelps' Chosen Aristocrats, or I could go back to the Highways and bite everybody in sight.

I laughed at my image in the mirror. I am a democratic sort of soul, but when it comes to biting, there's some I'd rather bite than others.

I bared my teeth at my image, but it was more of a leering smile of the tooth-paste ad than a fierce snarl.

My image looked pensive. It was thinking, *Steve, old carnivore, ere you go biting anybody, you've first got to bite your way out of The Medical Center.*

CHAPTER XIX

ONE hour later they pulled my fangs without benefit of anaesthesia.

Thorndyke came in to inspect the progress of my infection and allowed as how I'd be about ready for the full treatment in a few hours. "We like to delay the full treatment as long as possible," he told me, "because it immobilizes the patient too long as it is." He pressed a call bell, waited, and soon the door opened to admit a nurses' helper pushing a trundle cart loaded with medical junk. I still don't know what was on the cart because I was too flabbergasted to notice it.

I was paying all my attention to Catherine, cheerful in her Gray Lady uniform, being utterly helpful, bright, gay, and relaxed. I was tongue tied, geflummed, beaten down, and —well, just speechless.

Catherine was quite professional about her help. She loaded the skin-blast hypo and slapped it into Thorndyke's open hand. Her eyes

looked into mine and they smiled reassuringly. Her hand was firm as she took my arm; she locked her strength on my hand and held it immobile while Thorndyke shot me in the second joint. There was a personal touch to her only briefly when she breathed, "Steve, I'm so glad!" and then went on about her work. The irony of it escaped me; but later I did recall the oddity of congratulating someone who's just contracted a disease.

Then that wave of agony hit me, and the only thing I can remember through it was Catherine folding a towel so that the hem would be on the inside when she wiped the beads sweat from my face. She cradled my head between her hands and crooned lightly to me until the depths of the pain was past. Then she got efficient again and waved Thorndyke aside to see to the little straps on the manipulator herself. They were adjusted delicately; not too tight nor too loose. Then Catherine poured some more ice water from my pitcher and put the glass where I could reach it.

She left, but mentioned as she left that she'd be back to help me when it was time to take off the manipulator. That was all right with Thorndyke; he was a telepath, probably better than Catherine was, so he knew that she'd be back to talk with me alone. Since he didn't object, it must be all right.

Then after Catherine had gone for a few minutes, Thorndyke looked down at me and smiled self-confidently. "There, Steve," he said, "Is your lever!"

I tried to curse him but the words wouldn't come. I just thought them, and ended up with, *How did you sell her a bill of goods, Thorndyke?*

He laughed. "Maybe she thinks enough of your hide to keep it in one unbroken piece," he told me with a leer. "And then, too, Steve, you should know by now that nobody, but nobody, can sell gold-bricks to a telepath!"

He left me with my thoughts whirling up and around darkly like a gathering thunderhead.

The little machine worked my finger joint up and down, up and down, moving not only the joint of the new danger, but the old first joint, which by now was frozen so solid that my own muscles had not the strength to bend it. Each bending operation sent waves of agony darting up my arm to the shoulder, and each dart interrupted my thinking mechanism so that my mental rundown was a long way from behind a crystal clear thought line.

But anyway, I pondered Dr. Thorndyke's last statement. It did make sense; it was true that confidence men can't make money off of a telepath. But just where this

fit the picture was not clear to me. I just couldn't make it fit.

Naturally, with Catherine in the Medical Center I'd be inclined to play their game whether I liked it or not. I'd even conduct myself in a most careful manner, avoiding contact with telepaths, or at least avoiding the image of the truth when I was among telepaths. I could fit a prisoner into the puzzle easily. If Catherine had been kept there against her will I could understand what was going on. But she was not. She looked and acted happy about it.

How she'd come there bothered me, too, but not as much. Obviously they'd contacted her in some way and let her know that my hide was in danger. Come to us, they'd say, and we'll see to it that your lover is not allowed to die. Catherine would come, just as I'd have gone to Catherine. But I'd have gone hating every damned one of them to the core instead of standing by to help. Of course, she might have offered to help in order to see how I was treated, but even if she were a prisoner she'd be able to read their minds as to my welfare. She didn't have to take on a job of work.

No, Catherine had not been sold a bill of goods.

I went over Phelps' little lecture. One thing I had to admit:

There was a certain justification for their way of thinking. I didn't agree with it, but I could not condemn it completely. One does have the right to wonder why the Human Race spends so much time keeping its drawbacks alive, educating its mental weaklings, medicating its physical wrecks, and by doing so generally keeping the total level of culture geared down to the level of the dullard. I reluctantly admitted that it would not have taken much for me to have agreed with their plans. In fact, I might not require too much convincing to become a firm supporter of some form of mental aristocracy, providing I was assured of a high place in such a deal.

That little thought touched off another question in my mind. *Convincing*. Could Catherine have been convinced of their angle? Or—

How much of the old reorientation department might be necessary to cause a re-evaluation of one's place in the social structure? Especially when the Medical Center's angle was not wholly evil?

I shook my head. I don't know too much about the big boys and their problems in functional psychology; only what I'd read. What has been written indicates that changing a person's angle of view takes quite a time since this angle of view is based upon their life, training, background, and just about any-and every-thing that

goes into making an adult human being.

I doubted that Catherine had been here long enough to go through any reorientation.

No— Catherine hadn't been here long enough.

But I was going to be!

They'd have me immobilized and anaesthetized just as I'd seen the cure-cases at Homestead. Helpless, fed by vein, kept alive by constant care, a human helpless in the hands of his caretakers.

They could cure me of my infection and cure me of thinking wrong at one and the same time!

A bit wildly I looked around me; I dug outside my room, covered the whole place as best as my perception would let me in between the waves of pain that surged up my arm. The place was filled with nurses and nurses' helpers, a few preliminary patients, a new arrival who was sitting on the edge of her bed staring at her foot with horror, a doctor taking a blood specimen, a scholar explaining something to one of the patients, a sub-doctor making overtures to one of the nurses. The latter had nothing to do with medicine but they were to most normal people in The Medical Center as far as my sense of perception would cover.

Catherine was down on the first floor pattering over an autoclave and rutting out a whole string of

instruments. With her was a superintendent of nurses, obviously explaining how the job was to be done. I took a deep, thankful breath. I was glad that her mind was occupied, because at that moment I did not want even a loved-one to read the dark thoughts that were going through my mind.

All it was going to take was just a little convincing under the hands of a scholar of psychology, and Steve Cornell would become one of the haughty aristocrats who believed that the magnificent benefits available to modern man should be restricted to those Chosen Few who would be selected for their compliance to the idea of aristocracy.

All it was going to take was a chance at me while I lay helpless. Then I'd be swearing allegiance to Scholar Phelps and The Medical Center, and going out to bite those Chosen People whose pedigrees and mental attitude agreed with Phelps' aristocracy.

The waves of pain were diminishing, now, and I was thinking less wildly. I kept one hunk of perception on Catherine; somehow I both wanted and not-wanted to have her come in. I was afraid of **what** I'd learn from her, and if I learned something that I should not be afraid to know, then I was afraid that neither Catherine nor I would be able to wriggle out of the fix we were in.

The joint looked, of course, as though nobody had any ideas of escape. But I knew that any attempt would bring down the psi-hound dogs and I'd be collected within the first half-mile of running.

Yet—

AND then, because I was preoccupied with Catherine and my own thoughts, the door opened without my having taken a dig at the opener beforehand.

This arrival was all I needed to crack wide open in a howling fit of hysteria. It was so damned pat. I couldn't help but let myself go banally: "Well! This looks like Old Home Week!"

Miss Gloria Farrow, Registered Nurse, did not respond to my awkward joviality. Her face, if anything, was darker than my thoughts. I doubted that she had her telepathy working; people who get that wound up sometimes find it hard to see and hear straight, let alone think right. And telepathy or perception goes out of kilter first because the psi is a very delicate factor.

She eyed me coldly. "You utter imbecile," she snarled. "You—"

"Woah, baby!" I said. "Slow down. I'm a bit less than bright, but what have I done now?"

Farrow cooled visibly, then her face sort of came apart and she sort

of flopped forward onto the bed and buried her face in my shoulder. I couldn't help but make comparisons; she was like a hunk of marble, warm and vibrant. Like having a statue crying on my shoulder. She sagged against me like a loose bag of cement and her hands clutched at my shoulder-blades like a pair of C-clamps. A big juicy tear dropped from her cheek to land on my chest, and I was actually surprised to find that a teardrop from a Mekstrom did not land like a drop of mercury. It just splashed like any other drop of salt water, spread out, and made my chest wet.

Eventually I held her up from me, shook her relaxed body gently, and said, "Now what's the shooting all about, Farrow?"

She shook her head as if to clear her thinking gear.

"Steve," she said in a quietly serious tone, "I've been such an utter fool."

"You're not unique, Farrow," I told her. "People have been doing damfool stunts since—"

"I know," she broke in. Then with an effort at lightheartedness, she added, "There must be a different version of that Garden Of Eden story. Eve is always blamed as having tempted Adam. Somewhere, Old Adam must have been slightly to blame—?"

I didn't know what she was driv-

ing toward, but I stroked her hair and waited. She was probably right. It still takes two of a kind to make one pair.

"Steve—get out of here! While you're safe!"

"Huh?" I blurted. "What cooks, Farrow?"

"I was a nice patsy," she said. She sat up and wiped her eyes with the hem of her uniform. It was just a natural gesture and she didn't realize that she'd displayed a fine pair of thighs in the process. Then she dropped the hem of her uniform over them as if nothing had happened and she said, with an audible effort to keep her voice from cracking: "I was a fool. Steve, If James Thorndyke had asked me to jump off the roof, I'd have asked him 'what direction?' that's how fat-headed I am."

"Yes?" Something was beginning to form, now.

"I—led you on, Steve."

That blinkoed me. The phrase didn't jell. The half a minute she'd spent bawling on my shoulder with my arms around her had been the first physical contact I'd ever had with Nurse Farrow. It didn't seem—

"No, Steve. Not that way. I couldn't see you for Thorndyke any more than you could see me for Catherine." Her telepathy had returned, obviously; she was in better control of herself. "Steve," she

said, "I led you on; did everything that Thorndyke told me to. You fell into it like a rock. Oh—it was going to be a big thing. All I had to do was to haul you deeper into this mess, then I'd disappear strangely. Then we'd be—tog—ether — we'd be—"

SHE started to come unglued again but stopped the dissolving process just before the wet and gooey stage set in. She seemed to put a set in her shoulders, and then she looked down at me with pity. "Poor esper," she said softly, "you couldn't really know—"

"Know what?" I asked harshly.

"He fooled me—too," she said, in what sounded like a complete irrelevancy.

"Look, Farrow, try and make a bit of sense to a poor perceptive who can't read a mind. Keep it running in one direction, please?"

Again, as apparently irrelevant, she said, "He's a top grade telepath; he knows control—"

"Control—?" I asked blankly.

"You don't know," she said.

"But a good telepath can think in patterns that prevent lesser telepaths from really digging deep. Thorndyke is brilliant, of scholar grade, really. He—"

"Let's get back to it, Farrow. What's cooking?"

Sternly she tossed her head. It was an angry motion, one that

showed her disdain for her own weakness. "Your own sweet Catherine."

I eyed her, not coldly but with a growing sympathy. I tried to formulate my own idea but she went on, briskly, "That accident of yours was one of the luckiest things that ever happened to you, Steve."

She said no more. She just let it hang there while I finished it off all by myself.

"How long have I been known to be a Mekstrom Carrier?" I asked her bluntly.

She looked me in the eyes and said, "About three weeks before you met Catherine. It took three weeks to put her in a position to meet you, Steve."

Well, that put the icing on the cake. If it hadn't been for that pile-up near the Harrison place, I'd have married Catherine and gone on to become part and parcel of The Medical Center's mode of operation. Somewhere along the line I'd have mentioned the cockeyed road signs to someone who'd eventually get the information into the right hands, leaving me to act as hatchet man; their collector of worthy souls. That pile-up must have really loused up their program.

"It did, Steve," she said. "As soon as that took place and Catherine was found by the Highways In Hiding, they had to take a new

step and play it by ear." She frowned. "You loused things up for both sides."

"Both sides?"

She nodded glumly. "Until that happened, The Medical Center group did not know that the Highways were in operation. But when Catherine disappeared, Thorndyke did a fine job of probing you deep while you were under anaesthesia. That's when he caught on to the Highways and sent you on their trail. In the meantime—"

"Look," I snapped shortly, "There's a lot of holes in your story, Farrow. For instance—"

She held up a hand to stop me. "Steve," she said quietly, "You're a non-telepath. It is so inconceivably difficult for a non-telepath to get at the real truth that I'm not surprised that you're confused. You've people whom you trust telling conflicting stories. You don't know whom to believe. But I'm telling you—"

I stopped Farrow this time. "How can I believe you now?" I asked her pointedly. "You seem to have a part in this side of the quiet warfare."

NURSE Farrow made a gesture. It was a vulgar thing, a shock to see it come from a woman although it was probably the gesture best fitted to her feelings. Nurse Farrow spat upon the floor and

made a wry face as though she'd just discovered that the stuff she had in her mouth was a ball of woolly centipedes. "I'm a woman," she said simply. "I'm soft and gullible and easily talked into complacency. But I've just learned that their willingness to accept women is based upon the fact that no culture can thrive without women to propagate the race. I find that I am—" She paused, swallowed, and her voice became strained with bitterness, "—useful as a breeding animal. Just one of the peasants whose glory lies in carrying their heirs. But I tell you, Steve—" and here she became strong and her voice rang out with a vigorous rejection of her future, "I'll be forever damned if I will let my child be raised with the cockeyed notion that he has some God-Granted Right to Rule."

I picked it up from there. "So now I presume that the brilliant Doctor T. is going on his merry way to be fruitful, replenishing the Earth unto his own kind?"

"I've been a fool," she said quietly.

My mind went on babbling like an idiot and she followed my thoughts. I was cruel. Not maliciously cruel but factually cruel just because the truth often hurts. I went on and on, and I must have been very close to the truth because her face kept getting more and more hurt looking as I went on.

But she did not stop me.

I might have been babbling mentally for a long time if my vigilant sense of perception had not detected a change in the human-pattern in the building. People were moving — no, it was one person who was moving.

Down in the laboratory below, and at the other end of the building, Catherine had been working over an autoclave and some instruments. The waspish-looking superintendent had taken off for somewhere else, and while Catherine was alone now, she was about to be joined by Dr. Thorndyke. Half afraid that my perception of them would touch off their own telepathic sense of danger, I watched deliberately.

The door opened and Thorndyke came in; Catherine turned from her work and said something, which of course I could not possibly catch.

"What are they saying, Farrow?" I snapped.

"I don't know. They're too far for my range."

I swore, but I didn't really have to have a dialog script. Nor did they do the obvious. It was not the obvious. It was not the sudden clinch and smooch and maul and caress that gave them away. What they did was far more telling.

Thorndyke patted her playfully on the bottom, and Catherine turned to hold up a hand as if to slap

him but patted his cheek instead. They laughed at one another, and then Catherine began handing Thorndyke the instruments out of the autoclave, which he proceeded to mix in an unholy mess in the surgical tray. Catherine saw what he was doing and made some remark, chasing him away while she straightened the mess out deftly. She fended him away with her free hand, and then threatened him with a pair of haemostats big enough to clamp off a three-inch fire hose. It was—or would have been—pleasant enough looking horseplay, it was the sort of intimacy that people have only when they've been together for a long time. Thorndyke did not look at all frightened of the haemostats, and Catherine did not really look as though she'd follow through with her threat. They finally tangled in a wrestle for the instrument, and Thorndyke took it away from her. They leaned against a cabinet side by side, their elbows touching, and went on talking as though they had something important to discuss in the midst of their fun.

"Farrow," I asked gently, "What grade of telepath is Catherine?"

"Top," replied the nurse flatly. "I don't think she holds any high degrees in psi training, but I have a notion that she might be able to qualify for advanced training after the usual intensified preliminary

post graduate work. I wouldn't call her Rhine Scholar material, but—"

But it was enough. Enough to control and marshall her mind at any and all times to prevent other, lesser telepaths from really digging her deep and uncovering her secret mind.

Certainly sharp enough to lead a poor non-telepath around by the wedding ring in his nose.

Me? I was as big a fool as Farrow.

CHAPTER XX

NURSE Farrow caught my hand. "Steve," she snapped out in a rapid, flat voice, "Think only one thought. Think of how Catherine is here; that she came here to protect your life and your future!"

"Huh?"

"Think it!" she almost cried. "She's coming!"

I nearly fumbled it. Then I caught on. Catherine was coming; probably to remove the little finger manipulator and also to have a chit-chat with me. I didn't want to see her, and I was beginning to wish—then I remembered that one glimmer out of me that I knew the truth and it would be higher than Orbital Station One.

I sort of shoved my mind into low gear and started to think idle thoughts, letting myself sort of

daydream. I was convincing to myself; it's hard to explain exactly but I was play-thinking like a dramatist. I fell into it; it seemed almost truth to me as I roamed on and on. I'd been trapped and Catherine had come here to hand herself over as a hostage against my good behaviour. She'd somehow escaped the Highways bunch or maybe she just left them quietly. Somehow Phelps had seen to it that Catherine got word—I didn't know how, but that was not important. The important thing was Catherine being here as a means of keeping me alive and well.

I went on thinking the lie. Catherine came in shortly and saw what Nurse Farrow was doing.

"I was supposed to do that," said Catherine.

Nurse Farrow straightened up from her work of loosening the straps on the manipulator. "Sorry," she said in a cool, crisp voice. "I didn't know that. This is usually my job. It's a rather delicate proposition, you know." There was a chill of professional rebuff in Farrow's voice. It was the pert white hat and the gold pin looking down upon the gray uniform with no adornment. Catherine looked a bit uncomfortable but she apparently had to take it.

Catherine tried lamely, "You see, Mr. Cornell is my finacee."

Farrow jumped on that one hard.

"I'm aware of that. So let's not forget that scholars of medicine do not treat their own loved ones for ethical reasons."

Catherine took it hard, like a slap across the face with an iced towel. "I'm sure that Dr. Thorndyke would not have told me to take care of it if I'd not been capable," she replied.

"Perhaps Dr. Thorndyke did not realize at the time that Mr. Cornell would be ready for the Treatment Department. Or," she added slyly, "have you been trained to prepare a patient for the full treatment?"

"The full treatment — Why, Dr. Thorndyke did not seem to think—"

"Please," said Farrow with that cold crispness coming out hard, "As a nurse I must keep my own opinion to myself, as well as keeping the opinions of doctors to myself. I take orders only and I perform them."

That was a sharp shot; practically telling Catherine that she, as a nurses' helper, had even less right to go shooting off her mouth. Catherine started to reply but gave it up. Instead she came over and looked down at me. She cooed and stroked my forehead.

"Ah, Steve," she breathed, "So you're going for the treatment. Think of me, Steve. Don't let it hurt too much."

I smiled thinly and looked up into her eyes. They were soft and warm, a bit moist. Her lips were full and red and they were parted slightly; the lower lip glistened slightly in the light. These were lips I'd kissed and found sweet; part of a face I'd held between my hands. Her hair fluffed forward, a trifle as her head bent forward, it threatened to cascade down over her shoulders. The deep Vee of her uniform showed a flash of taut white satin; below the roundness of her breasts, her waist came in narrow and lithe encircled with the gray cloth belt of her uniform. This was the waist that had seemed so lissome in the circle of my arms. No, it was not at all hard to lie there and go on thinking all the soft-sweet thoughts I'd once hoped might come true—

She recoiled, her face changing swiftly from its mask of sweet concern to one of hard calculation. I'd slipped with that last hunk of thinking and given the whole affair away.

My thoughts went racing; in the time it took for Catherine to change her face and start to straighten up—from that instant to the point where she was upright and turning to head for the door—I went through the following routine: *She'd caught on, not to everything, but to enough to know that I was no longer the gullible non-*

telepath. And that in knowing enough of the truth to make me try to conceal my thoughts from her, I also knew enough to make me dangerous. For, of course, once I got the idea that she was not needed for any hostage, that I'd be reoriented whether she was there or not, then I was a dangerous enemy and not a simpleton to be lead around by the end of the long red tongue that I let hang out. And now it was time to see that I had no chance to be dangerous.

So Catherine straightened up and turned to head for the door. She took one step and caved in like a wet towel.

Over her still-falling body I saw Nurse Farrow calmly re-loading the skin-blast hypo, which she used to fire a second load into the base of Catherine's neck, just above the shoulder blades.

"That," said Farrow succinctly, "should keep her cold for a week. I just wish I'd been born with enough guts to commit murder."

"What—?"

"Get dressed," she snapped. "It's cold outside, remember?" I started to dress as Farrow hurled my clothing out of the closet at me. She went on in the meantime: "I knew you couldn't keep it entirely concealed from her. She's too good a telepath. So while you were holding her attention, I let her have a shot in the neck. One of the rather

bad things about being a Mekstrom is that minor items like the hypo don't register worth a damn."

I stopped. "Isn't that bad? Seems to me that I've heard that pain is a necessary factor for the preservation of the—"

"Stop yapping and dress," snapped Farrow. "Pain is useful when it's needed. It isn't needed in the case of a pin pricking the hide of a Mekstrom. When a Mekstrom gets in the way of something big enough to harm him physically, then it hurts him nervously."

"Sort of when a locomotive falls on their head?" I grunted.

"Keep on dressing. We're not out of this jungle yet."

"So have you any plans?"

She nodded soberly. "Yes, Steve. Once you asked me to be your telepath. to complete your team. I let you down. Now I've picked you up again, and from here on— out—I—"

I nodded. "Sold," I told her.

"Good. Now, Steve, dig the hallway."

I did. There was no one there. I opened my mouth to tell her so, and then closed it foolishly.

"Dig the hallway down to the left. Farther. To the door down there—three beyond the one you're perceiving now— is there a wheelchair there?"

"Wheelchair?" I blurted.

"Steve, this is a hospital. They

don't even let a man with an aching tooth walk to the toothache ward. He rides. Now, you keep a good esper watch on the hall and if anybody looks out while I'm gone, just cast a deep dig at their face. It's possible that at this close range I can identify them from the perceived image in your mind. Although, God Knows, no two people ever *see* anything alike, let alone perceive it."

SHE slipped out, leaving me with the recumbent form of my former sweetheart. As she lay there, her face had fallen into the relaxed expression of sleep, sort of slack and unbuttoned.

Tough, baby, I thought as I turned my eyesight off by closing my eyes so that all my energy could be aimed at the use of my perception.

Farrow was going down the hall like a professional heading for the wheelchair on a strict order. No one bothered to look out; she reached the locker room and dusted the wheelchair just as if she'd been getting it for a real patient. (The throb in my finger returned for a parthian shot and I remembered that I *was* a real patient!) She trundled it back and into my room.

"In," she said. "And keep that perception aimed on the hallway, the elevator, and the center corridor stairs."

She packed me with a blanket, tucking it so that my shoes and overclothing would not show, doing the job briskly. Then she scooped Catherine up from the floor and dropped her into my bed. With a few deft motions she stripped the gray uniform from Catherine's slumbering body, peeled her down to the hide, and then rolled Catherine into one of the hospital doodads that hospitals use for male and female alike as bedclothing.

"Anyone taking a fast dig in here will think she's a patient— unless the digger knows that this room is supposed to be occupied by one Steve Cornell, obviously male. Now, Steve, ready to steer?"

"Steer?"

"Steer by esper. I'll drive. Oh— I know the way," she told me with a chuckle. "You just keep your perception peeled for characters who might be over-nosy. I'll handle the rest."

We went along the hallway. I took fast digs at the rooms and long ahead of us; the whole coast seemed clear. Waiting for the two-bit elevator was nerve wracking and I wondered why in the devil hospitals always had such poky elevators. But eventually it came and we trundled aboard. The pilot was no bigdome. He smiled at Nurse Farrow and nodded genially at me. He was probably a blank, jockeying an elevator is about the top job for a

non-psi these days.

But as the elevator started down a doctor, or at least someone in a white suit, came out of one of the rooms on the floor below. He took a fast look at the indicator above the elevator door and made a dash to thumb the button. The elevator came to a grinding halt and he got on.

This bothered me, but Farrow merely simpered at the guy and melted him down to size. She made some remark to him that I couldn't hear, but from the sudden increase of his pulse rate, I gathered that she'd really put him off guard. He replied in the same unintelligible tone and reached for her hand. She let him hold it; in fact she held the back of his hand against her thigh, and if the guy was thinking of anything that was likely to be dangerous to me, my name is Sing Hoy Low and I am a Chinese Policeman.

He held her hand until we hit the first floor, and he debarked with a calf-like glance at Nurse Farrow. We went on to the ground floor and down the lower corridor to the end, where Farrow spent another lifetime and a half filling out a white cardboard form.

The superintendent eyed me with a sniff. "I'll call the car," she said.

I half-expected Farrow to make some objection, but she quietly nodded and we waited for another

lifetime until a big car whined to a stop outside. Two big guys in white coats came in, tripped the lever on back of the wheelchair and stretched me out flat and low-slung on the same wheels. It was a neat conversion from wheelchair to wheeled stretcher, but as Farrow trundled me out into the cold feet first, I felt a sort of nervous chill somewhere south of my navel. She swung me around at the last minute and I was shoved head first into the back of the car.

Car? This was a full-fledged ambulance, about as long as a city block and as heavy as a battleship. It was completely fitted for everything that anybody could think of from the medical angle, including a great big muscular turbo-electric power plant capable of putting many miles per behind the tailpipe.

THE door closed on my feet, and we took off with Farrow sitting right behind the two big hospital attendants, one of whom was driving and the other of whom was ogling Farrow in a manner calculating. She invited the ogle. Hell, she did it in such a way that I couldn't help ogling a bit myself. I've said that Farrow was an attractive woman; if I haven't said so, it was because I hadn't really paid attention to her looks. But she was with it, and so I went along and ogled, realizing in the dimmer and more obscure re-

cesses of my mind that if I ogled in a loudy lewd manner, I'd not be thinking of what we were doing. Or, as it turned out, what she was doing.

So while I was pleasantly occupied in ogling, Farrow slipped two more hypos out from under her clothing. She slipped her hands out sideways on the backs of their seats, put her face between them and said, "Anybody got a cigarette, fellows?"

The next that took place happened, in order of occurrence, as follows:

The driver grunted and turned his head to look down the neckline of her uniform. The other guy fumbled for a cigarette whilst enjoying the scenery. Driver poked at the lighter on the dash, still dividing his attention between the road and Nurse Farrow's bu-zoom. The man beside him reached for the lighter when it popped out and he held it for her while she puffed it into action. Farrow fingered the triggers on the skin-blast hypos. The man beside the driver replaced the lighter in its socket on the dash. The driver took another look at the inviting vista and slid aside and to the floor, just a second before the other hospital orderly flopped down like a deflated balloon.

The ambulance took a swoop to the right, nosed down into a shallow ditch and leaped like a shot

deer out on the other side.

Farrow went over the back of the seat in a flurry that looked like a bushel full of fresh laundry and I rolled off of my stretcher into the angle of the floor and the sidewall. There was a rumble and then a series of crashes before we came to a shuddering halt. I came up from beneath a pile of assorted medical supplies, braced myself against the canted deck, and looked out the windshield. The trunk of a tree split the field of view as close to dead center as it could be.

"Out, Steve," said Farrow, untangling herself from the steering wheel and the two attendants. "Out! God Damn it, anyway!"

"What next?" I asked her.

"This is hell. We've made enough racket to wake the Statue of Lincoln. Out and run for it."

"Which way?"

"Follow me!" she snapped, and took off. Even in nurse's shoes with those semi-heels, Farrow made time in a phenomenal way. I lost ground steadily. Luckily it was still early in the afternoon, so I used my perception to keep track of her once she got out of sight. She was following the gently rolling ground, keeping to the lower hollows and, I knew, she was gradually heading toward a group of buildings off in the near-distance.

I caught up with her just as we hit a tiny patch of dead area; just

on the far side of the area she stopped and we flopped on the ground and panted out lungs full of nice biting air. Then she pointed at the collection of buildings and said, "Steve, take a few steps out of this deadness and take a fast dig. Look for cars."

I nodded; a few steps forward I could send my esper forward to dig the fact that there were several cars of the passenger type parked in a row near one of the buildings. I wasted no time in digging any deeper, I just retreated into the dead area and told her what I'd seen.

"Take another dig, Steve. Take a dig for ignition keys. We've got to steal."

"I don't mind stealing." I took another trip into the open section and gandered at ignition locks. I tried to memorize the ones with keys hanging in the locks but failed to remember all of them. I ran off what I'd remembered to her.

"Okay, Steve. This is where we walk in boldly and walk up to a couple of cars and get in and drive off."

"Yeah, but why—"

"That's the only way we'll ever get out of here," she said firmly.

I shrugged. Farrow knew more about The Medical Center than I did. If that's the way she figured it, that's the way it had to be. We broke out of the dead area, and as

we came into the open, Farrow linked her arm in mine and hugged it against her.

"Make like a couple of fatuous mushbirds," she chuckled. "We've been out walking and communing with nature and getting acquainted and probably—but think embarrassed, Steve—pitching a bit of the old ardent back in that nice, private, dead area."

"Isn't the fact that you're Mekstrom and I'm human likely to cause some rather pointed comment?"

"It would if we were to stick around to hear it," she said. "And if they try to read our minds, all we have to do is to think nice mushy thoughts. Fact is," she said quietly, "it won't be hard."

"Huh?"

"You're a rather nice guy, Steve. You're fast on the uptake, you're generally pleasant. You've got an awful lot of grit, guts, and determination, Steve. You're no pinup boy, Steve, but—and this may come as a shock to you—women don't put one-tenth the stock in pulchritude that men do. You—"

"Hey. Woah," I bubbled. "Slow down, before you—"

She hugged my arm again. "Steve," she said seriously, "I'm not in love with you. It's not possible for a woman to be in love with a man who does not return that love. You don't love me.

But you can't help but admit that I am an attractive woman, Steve, and perhaps under other circumstances and given the right amount of time under the aforementioned circumstances, you'd take on a large load of that old feeling. I'll admit that the reverse could easily take place. Now, let's forget all the odd angles and start thinking like a pair of people for whom the time, the place, and the opposite sex all turned up opportunely."

I couldn't help thinking of Nurse Farrow as—Nurse Farrow. The name Gloria did not quite come out. I tried to submerge this mental attitude, and so I looked down at her with what I hoped to resemble the expression of a love-struck male. I think it was closer to the expression of a would-be little-theatre actor expressing lust, and not quite making the grade. Farrow giggled.

But as I sort of leered down at her, I had to admit upon proper examination of her charm that Nurse Farrow could very easily become Gloria, if as she said, we had the time to let the change occur. Another idea formed in my mind: If Farrow had been kicked in the emotions by Thorndyke, I'd equally been pushed in the face by Catherine. That made us sort of kindred souls, as they used to call it in the early books of the Twentieth Century.

Gloria Farrow chuckled. "Unlike

the old torch-carriers of that day," she said, "We rebound a bit too fast."

Then she let my arm go and took my hand. We went swinging across the field in a sort of happy comradeship; it must have looked as though we were long-term friends or lovers. She was a good egg, hurt and beaten down and shoved off by Thorndyke, but she had a lot of the good old bounce. Of a sudden impulse, I wanted to kiss her.

"Go ahead, Steve," she said. "But it'll be for the probable on-lookers. I'm Mekstrom, you know."

So I didn't try. I just put an arm around her briefly and realized that any attempt at affection would be like trying to strike sparks off of flint with a hunk of flannel.

WE walked hand in hand towards the buildings, strolled up saucily towards two of the parked cars, made a sort of wave at one another (It was the sort of wave that lovers give one another in goodbye when they don't really want to demonstrate their affection before ten thousand people) and stepped into two cars and took off.

Gloria Farrow was in the lead.

We went howling down the road, Farrow in the lead car by a hundred feet and Steve behind her hoping that she didn't think she could pile up and walk away—with me

at her side. We went roaring around a curve, over a hill, and I had my perception out to its range end which was far ahead of her car. The main gate came into range, and we bore down upon that wire and steel portal like a pair of madmen.

Gloria Farrow ploughed into the gate without letting up. The gate went whirling in pieces, glass flew and tires howled and bits of metal and plastic sang through the air. Her car weaved aside; I forgot the road ahead and put my perception into her car.

Farrow was fighting the wheel like a racing driver in a spin; her hands wrenched the wheel with the swift strength of the Mekstrom Flesh she wore, and the wheel bent under her hands. Over and around she went, with a tire blown and the lower rail of the big gate hanging onto the fender like a dry-land sea-anchor. She juggled the wheel and made a snaky path off to one side of the road.

Out of the guardhouse came a uniformed man with a riot gun. He did not have time to raise it. Farrow ironed out her course and aimed the careening car dead center. She mowed the guard down and a half a thousandth of a second later she plowed into the guardhouse. The structure erupted like an explosion; like a box of stove-matches hit with a heavy-caliber

soft-nosed slug, like a house of cards and an air-jet. There was a roar and a small gout of flame and then out of the flying wreckage on the far side came Farrow and her stolen car. Out of the mess of brimstone and shingles she came, turning end for end in a crazy, metal-crushing twist and spin. She ground to a broken halt before the last of the debris landed, and then

everything was silent.

And then for the first and only time in my life I felt the penetrant, forceful impact of an incoming thought; a mental contact from another mind:

Steve! it screamed in my mind, Get out! Get going! It's your move now—

I put my foot on the faucet and poured on the oil.

(To be concluded)



"Well, it's finished! Now to find a silly test pilot!"

FEATURED NEXT MONTH:—

WANTED: ONE SANE MAN

by FRANK M. ROBINSON

A STARTLING NOVELETTE—THAT MAY HAPPEN TOMORROW!



MOONFALL

by

A. Bertram Chandler

Lunar Base exploded with a flash of searing light. And Earth's investigating ship would never have found out why—except for one eye-witness . . .

THE end of Lunar Base could have been witnessed by roughly one half of Earth's population. Had the event been advertised in advance it would have been. But even MOONCOM, who were on the spot, could not have foreseen what was to be the finish of the marred and tarnished dream. For some hours before the climax, until they were closed forever, MOONCOM's radio channels to and from Earth were overburdened with reports, instructions, orders and counter-orders. But everything was in code. Nothing was allowed to leak out to the public.

Few, if any, of the astronomers saw it, although the Moon was full and the night abnormally clear all over the world. What need for them to train their telescopes on the satellite when exploring par-

ties had already ranged far over both seen and unseen hemispheres? Few of those out in the open by reason either of duty or of inclination saw it. Policemen shone their torches into dark shadows and did not look up to the sky. Lovers looked into each other's eyes. Watch-officers on the bridges of surface ships either scanned the horizon or peered at the illuminated dials of instruments. Meteorologists were too busy plotting their charts to go outside to see what the weather was like, except for those few that were outside reading gauges and meters.

Only in and around CINC-WHEM H. Q. were all eyes turned moonwards, were all instruments from astronomical telescopes to opera glasses, focussed on the shining, silvery surface of the full moon. It is said—although the

story may be apocryphal—that a humble Radar Mechanic Fourth Class, on seeing the distant, brief yet intolerable glare, exclaimed, "Cripes! What 'ave the silly bug-gers done *now*?"

FOUR days after the disaster the moonship *Selenite IV* dropped down to a gingerly landing about three miles to the west of what was left of MOONCOM H. Q. Her Captain sent a party of six men, under his First Lieutenant, to investigate. They were armed—three of the men carrying bazookas and all six, as well as the officer, supplied with the stud-triggered machine pistols that could be operated effectively even though the users were wearing heavy gloves. They had, with them a Geiger counter. The talker kept a continual stream of information flowing back to those in the ship by means of his suit radio.

At first the information was of a routine character. As the party approached the wreckage of the radio station, however, the speaker's voice tensed, stammered with emotion. "The station's had it," he said. "There are three bodies, flung clear. No-not blast. Not . . . blast. Girders like . . . like . . ." His gulp was audible in the ear-phones of all those listening. "Like half-chewed celery."

"Number One," came the Cap-

tain's sharp, authoritative voice. "Is that correct?"

"That is correct, sir. Shall I tell the talker to carry on?"

"Yes. carry on."

"Carry on."

"Ay, ay, sir. Carry on, sir, Wreckage twisted, broken—not fused. One . . . body . . . One body . . . trampled. Marks in the dust. Big. Footprints."

"How big?" asked the Captain.

"Big, sir. First Lieutenant, sir, what would you say?"

"All of six feet," said the First Lieutenant. "And two sets. Heading towards the Bomb Room. Carry on, Talker."

"Geiger reading — still Moon normal. Pieces of porcelain insulators — broken, thrown down in dust. Almost as though . . . as though . . ."

"As though what, man?"

"As though . . . spat out . . . Tractor here. Cabin smashed in. Gun ripped out . . . Barrel left . . . Breech mechanism . . . gone . . ."

"Hold, there!" The Captain's voice crackled through the helmet phones of the landing party. "Maintain radio silence. Listen." Then, after a long pause, "It's too faint here. What do you hear, Number One?"

"A . . . voice, sir. A woman's voice," he said, sharply, "All right. We hear you. Where are you?"

"Where is she?" barked the Cap-

tain.

"Isolation Hospital, sir. Shall we bring her in?"

"Of course. Wait. Is she a patient?"

"I'll ask, sir . . . No, sir. Nurse. She has a spacesuit, but air almost exhausted."

"Do I have to remind you that all of you carry spare tanks? Bring her in."

"Yes, sir."

IT was a long time before she could tell her story. She was suffering from hunger, thirst and near suffocation. The Isolation Hospital had not been in use at the time of the disaster, and neither she nor the man who had taken refuge with her there had been able to start the self-contained air-conditioning unit. She was suffering—above all—from shock. She had seen her fellow humans helpless before the onset of alien life in a world where no life—other than a few species of plants that were more like crystals than living beings—was known to exist. She had seen the tall masts of the radio station torn down and the pressure sphere crumpled like an empty eggshell. She had seen the stout airlock doors of the Base burst in like so much paper.

At last she talked. She lay, pale and haggard, in her cot in the

Captain's cabin, the Surgeon every now and again giving her a sip of restorative. The Captain was there, of course, and his First Lieutenant, and one of the ratings who had a knowledge of shorthand. A recording machine hummed quietly.

She could not say where the invaders—if invaders they were—had come from. "I think they belonged here," she said. "I could feel it, somehow. And they were puzzled to find us here, and angry when we started shooting at them. And they were hungry, hungry. John—he was with me in the Hospital, he was one of the doctors—said that they must have a fantastic metabolism, said that he'd give his life to be able to dissect one of them . . . And . . . and he gave his life. I told him to stay with me and wait. I told him! I told him!"

"Steady," said the Surgeon gently. "Have another sip of this."

She could not say where the strange beings had come from, but it seems certain that they were first sighted by the crew of a tractor carrying out a survey in the vicinity of Copernicus. And it was in the vicinity of Copernicus, too, as well as in other localities, that considerable test drillings had been carried out, in the early days of the Base, in the hopes of discovering metals in worthwhile quantities. No metals whatsoever had

been found.

It was by one of the old drillings, however, that the tractor crew had sighted what they had at first taken for two rockets standing on stilted landing gear. Their report had been relayed to Base—as, at the time, no line of sight communications was possible between the tractor and its headquarters—by ARTSAT II. The report was believed until a panicky voice had babbled that it wasn't rockets, that it was giants, two huge, metal giants, and that they were chasing the tractor. It seemed to those listening that the tractor crew had gone mad. Mad they might have been, but one thing was certain—during the chase, real or imaginary, the vehicle had plunged into a deep crevasse.

But MOONCOM had to investigate any threat, real or imaginary, to its security. One of the armed tractors was equipped and sent out, with orders to investigate but not to fight unless attacked. This tractor's crew, like the survey men, sent incredible messages about silver giants. This tractor's crew, unlike the surveymen, got back.

"We didn't believe it," said the girl. "We couldn't believe it. We knew, *we knew*, that nobody else had ever put a rocket on the Moon, had never even established a

Space Station. Even so—the first reports about the two rockets made some kind of sense. All the other reports didn't.

"I shouldn't have been out, I know. All personnel had been recalled. But I'd been out walking with John, looking for a moonflower to send home to my people. We heard the recall on our suit radios, but we didn't take it seriously. We dawdled. And then—there was the tractor coming over the ridge, the dust rising in front of it like the bow of a ship. Just a machine—but it looked as scared as the poor devils inside it. John and I just stood and watched, and all the time on the radio there was the clanging of alarm bells and the Old Man barking 'Action Stations! Action Stations!'

"It came over the ridge, skidded half sideways down the slope, and almost cannoned into the stilts of the radio station. It turned there, and we saw the snout of its gun lifting and wavering, looking for a target.

"It didn't have long to wait. The giants came, the two of them. One of them was a man—the other a woman. Impossible? Yes, I know, I *know*. But I'm telling you what I saw. All gleaming metal they were, but the shape of them was human. Yes—I *know* that they were a man and woman,

just as I know that you're men and I'm a woman.

“THE tractor gun steadied. We didn't hear anything, of course, but we saw the orange flame, the smoke, and we saw the flash when the first shell burst between the woman's breasts. It staggered her, and the man put out a shining arm to support her. The next shell hit his shoulder. The other missed—the giants were moving too fast to make a good target, weaving as they ran.

“The tractor started to swing again, half hidden by the smother of dust raised by its tracks. I think that its crew intended to run the giants off from Base H. Q. But the man . . . *kicked* it, and it went over on its side, its tracks going around and around uselessly. It was like a stupid insect on its back.

“They walked up to the radio station then, quite calmly. The woman put out just one hand, caught hold of one of the stilts. It pulled away from its foundations, from the pressure sphere, like a . . . like a stick of candy. The woman broke it in two. She gave half of it to the man . . .”

“And then?” prompted the Surgeon.

“They have a crazy metabolism,” said the girl. “They . . . they *eat* metal. The first taste of

it seemed to break all their restraints. They tore into the radio house like starving dogs into a plateful of bones. No—that's not right. They were hungry. They were starving — yet all the time, were—considerate. Of each other.”

“They didn't show much consideration for our men,” the Captain snapped.

“But they were hungry” said the girl. “And we'd shot at them, tried to kill them. And when John and I saw the wreck of the radio house we wanted to kill them, too. But our job, our action station, was in Casualty. We started to creep towards the airlock doors, scared of making any movement that would attract the attention of the giants. My knees were as weak as water and I was sick inside my helmet and all I could think of was one of those huge feet crushing me like a beetle.

“The airlock doors opened long before we got to them. They opened, and they slammed shut again. Twelve of the men ran out, carrying half a dozen heavy bazookas. They were fast—but they weren't fast enough. The giant man threw the ten feet or so of girder he was holding and it smashed the men down into the pumice dust. We could see the blood from where we were.

“And then, almost casually, the giants strolled over to the airlock.

We watched them bending down, examining the doors with interest. As casually as they had approached them, they kicked them in. They pulled the wreckage clear, kicked in the inner doors as easily as they had done the outer ones. It was like watching children destroying an ant hill. Those inside the Base who had had time to get into their spacesuits came pouring out, carrying all kinds of weapons.

"Down!" John was saying. 'Down. Play dead. It's our only chance' So we grovelled down in that damned dust, not daring to move a limb, watched the giants finish off what was left of our people. Then, almost as an afterthought, they went and kicked in the pressure cabin of the tractor—its engines were still working—and pulled out the bodies of the crew. After they'd looked at them for a little while they dropped them, started wandering around like kids in a strange garden. It must have been hours—it seemed like hours—before they drifted off in the direction of the Bomb Room. Herricks was there, and Pendray, and we warned them with our suit radios that the giants were coming their way. They said that they were going to detonate the bombs. I don't know what happened. Something must have gone wrong—or they just didn't get around to

it."

"But they did," said the Captain. "They did. We could see the flash back on Earth."

"*They* didn't. Herricks and Pendray didn't.

"As soon as the coast was clear we ran for the Isolation Hospital. It seemed safe there, somehow, with walls round us and a roof over our heads and no windows to see the bodies and the wreckage. We sat there, waiting for the violent tremor that would tell us that the bombs had gone up. We waited and waited, and nothing happened, and we argued as to whether or not we should feel anything. We tried to raise Herricks on our radio, or any other survivor, but the air was dead.

"Then John said, 'I have to go. I have to go and see what's happened.'

"No," I told him. "No."

"I must," he said.

"Then I'll come with you," I told him.

"But he wouldn't have that. 'You just sit here,' he said 'and listen. You can't take notes—not in those gloves—but I know what a memory you've got. Just sit and listen.'

"He talked all the way to the Bomb Room. He said that the giants hadn't gone straight there, but had followed, as far as

he could judge by their footprints, a very erratic path. But John kept on straight for the Bomb Room.

"You know what it's like—or what it *was* like. It was the only structure—or cave—on the Moon with giant-sized doors. The doors, as usual, had been kicked in. John edged up to them, cautiously, and saw that some sort of booby trap with wires had been arranged but, obviously, had failed to work. He didn't see anything of Herricks or Pendray.

"It was the first time that he'd been in the Bomb Room. There was enough light for him to find his way around, the emergency lamps were on. His voice came weak and tinny over the helmet phones. 'I'm slinking from pillar to pillar,' he said, 'keeping in the shadows. Oh. These can't be pillars—must be the bombs. Plutonium? Radiation? Rather too late, now, to worry about it . . .'

"He found the giants, at last. They didn't see him. He found them, standing under the yellow lights, towering above the pillars that were the bombs. He said that they shone like gold. 'A golden man and a golden woman,' he said. 'I wish that we hadn't fought. I wish that we had met them as friends . . .' He said something about it's being impossible to believe that such beings were in any way evil. 'They fought for food,' he whis-

pered. 'In self defense. We would do the same . . . Suspended animation, it must have been. The last crumbs of metal in their world gone, and cannibalism utterly repugnant. Suspended animation—and then *we* come, and somehow wake them. We come—rich in the stuff that is life to them . . .'

"He crouched there, in the shadow of one of the bombs, watching them. He saw, he told me, the golden woman pick up one of the cylinders with miraculous ease. And she broke it, and she . . . *peeled* it, as I would peel an orange. She ripped away the steel, or whatever it was, and handed a sphere, a ball, a ball with a hole through it, to her mate. From the other end of the bomb she took a cylinder of the same metal as the ball. It was the plutonium, John said. He said that they were going to eat the plutonium. It was then that he cried that he'd sell his soul for a chance to take them apart, to see what made them tick.

"He was quiet for a long time. I thought that they'd got him. I was afraid. I could have screamed with joy when I heard his voice again. And I almost laughed, so embarrassed it was. He was a scientist, and he knew the facts of life—but, in some things, he was very prudish.

"Jenny,' he said 'Jenny . . .' and I could *feel* him blushing.

"Don't listen to this unless you want to. It's . . ."

"It's what?"

"Well . . . I'm not a *voyeur*, Don't think that, please. I'm watching this as a scientist . . ."

"What are you watching?"

"They're so human, damn them. They shouldn't be, they *can't* be, but they are. Tin giants, animated statues, but . . . Look at it this way. They've been dead, to all intents and purposes, since before the Pyramids were built, in all probability. Something's started them ticking again. They've found food. They've fought and beaten their enemies. What re-

mains?"

"What remains?" he asked again.

"Reproduction," I said bluntly. I wish that I'd been less blunt, a little kinder.

"Yes," he whispered. "Yes. If only they weren't so damned *human*!"

"He was silent for a while. I'm no telepath, but I could sense his shame and embarrassment as he watched them . . . embracing.

"Then suddenly, before the explosion, he screamed two words."

"What were they?" asked the Captain urgently.

"Critical Mass," she said.

THE END

★ TV From The Moon! ★

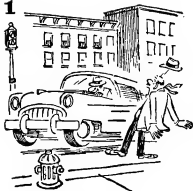
LONG before men make the journey, the Moon will have become a useful outpost of civilization. Captivated by the U. S. Army and Australian "radar contacts" with the Moon, engineers of a large American radio company have conducted a series of tests using the huge globe as a reflector for radio waves.

Beams of signals shot from a location in Iowa, were propelled to the Moon, reflected and received hundreds of miles away from the transmitting station. Naturally they were weak and diminished in intensity, but a powerful transmitter could correct this.

They are planning to make world-wide television practical by bouncing the programs from the Moon, a huge mirror in effect. The reflected waves can clearly blanket the Earth below. All this without any coaxial cables, airplanes floating in the stratosphere or relay stations!

As yet the only problem requiring solution is the construction of suitably powerful transmitters. Technically this is a relatively minor chore. The only superior system of TV relay transmission waits on the construction of an artificial satellite—and that isn't here yet—but the Moon is!

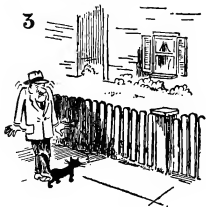
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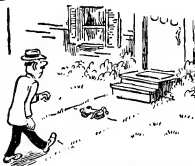
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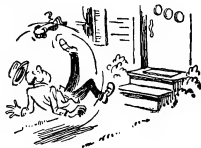
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We guarantee this story to be fiction, so don't get offended. The situation is incredible, yet possible—and if it occurred one might say—

The Pleasure Was Ours

by

Ray Russell

LAUGH. I don't care. Call me a liar—that's all right, too. But I know what I saw.

It was a hot summer night. Both fans were going but my office was like a steam bath. The rest of our small staff had gone home but I was still sweating over my typewriter, slugging out the last hunk of caption copy for the next issue. Every month something is always left until the deadline, and as editor of *Satyr*, it's my responsibility to see that it's done. Competition is keen in the men's magazine field, and none of us can afford to dent our sales by missing an issue.

I looked up from my typewriter and saw I had a visitor. He was standing in the doorway, briefcase in hand. I wasn't happy to see him because our printers were waiting for the copy, but he said he had some color photos he wanted me to look at, and we're always in the market for good color stuff. The

most popular feature in *Satyr* is the double-page full-color nude every month, and really good ones are few and far between.

"My name's Brown," he said. It was obviously Anglicized because he had a thick accent and an undefinable foreign air about him.

"Howdy." The only available chair was stacked high with cartoon roughs. "Just toss that stuff on the floor and sit down, Mr. Brown. Pardon our filing system—we're just getting started here."

"I know." He smiled and sat down. "I have a particular interest in publications like yours and I was especially pleased to note the appearance of *Satyr*. Perhaps I can interest you in—these." He handed me a brown envelope he had taken from his briefcase. I opened it and a dozen color transparencies slid out on my desk.

I picked up one and held it to the light as I said, "Well, we're



rather fussy, Mr. Brown. Most of the shots we see are . . . *wow!*" My face zoomed in to the photograph and I studied it, unbelieving.

"You find it unusual?" asked Mr. Brown.

I felt like yelling, *Unusual? It's sensational!* but I didn't want him to up his price. It was hard to keep calm, though. The girl on the photo was the most incredible creature I had ever seen. A figure like nothing in this world. The closest parallel might be the exaggerated drawings of Petty or Varga—but she surpassed even those idealized dream girls and *she* was no drawing, she was a flesh-and-blood woman. And her face: name your favorite movie queens, put them all together—and then forget them. Because she put them all to shame. There was sex in her face. Not the Hollywood variety "eyes half-closed, mouth half-open, artificial, frigid": the sex in her face was the genuine article—it expressed itself mainly in a crinkle around her eyes, a canny crinkle that said she knew there were good things in life and she enjoyed them. She looked just a little bit hungry for those good things, too, and that look was strangely attractive. "Very . . ." (my throat was dry) ". . . very interesting."

"I think you will find the others of equal or superior quality."

It was a deliberate understatement.

Each shot I picked up was a different girl and each seemed better than the last. Reproduced on our double-page spread, they would send our circulation rocketing. I masked my excitement and casually mumbled, "Yes, we may be able to use some of these. What are you asking for them?" We paid \$100 each for color shots, but I was willing to go as high as \$175 for these. I was in for another surprise when Brown answered:

"Oh, you may have them for nothing."

I swallowed audibly and appraised Mr. Brown. Thin as a rail, tall, pale, well-dressed, cultivated, he gave the appearance of an overbred European of good family. Hardly the type to be peddling nude photographs. But then he wasn't peddling them. He was giving them away. "For nothing?" I repeated.

He nodded. "In return for a small favor."

Ah. The catch. What did he want—stock in the company, an exclusive contract? "What kind of favor, Mr. Brown?"

"I have noticed that you never mention the model's name in your color feature."

"That's right. She's always anonymous—just '*Satyr's* Nymph of the Month.' More mysterious that way, we figure."

"Yes, I understand. However, I

can let you have these pictures only if you agree to use the young ladies' names and say a little something about them."

"Something like what?"

"Just a line or two. I have the material here." He handed me a couple of typed sheets.

I began to get the pitch. "You're a promotion man?"

"Yes, I suppose you might call me that. I represent an establishment called the Babylon. These young ladies are employed there."

We are continually turning down showgirls' agents wanting free publicity. I didn't cotton to the idea of plugging some night club in every issue. "Sorry, Mr. Brown," I said. "I'd much rather buy the photos. How about a hundred dollars a shot?"

He shook his head.

"One seventy-five?"

"These photographs are not for sale, sir."

"Not even for, say, two hundred?"

"Not for any price. They are yours gratis—in return for the small favor I requested."

I looked at the shots again. There were twelve of them—enough for a whole year—and they were knockouts. Living calendar girls with the faces of lecherous angles. And free. It would save us \$1200 we could use to pay off our printers. All in return for

a few lines of publicity . . . I skimmed the typed sheets. The stuff wasn't outrageous by any means: just the names of the girls, the fact they could be seen at the Babylon, and the address. It was just outside of town.

"OK, Mr. Brown. It's a deal."

JACK Regan went wild when he saw the shots. He's our art director, and I showed them to him bright and early the next morning. His eyes were still half-shut with sleep, but not for long.

We threw out the nude we had scheduled for the following issue and started using Brown's girls immediately. The response was terrific: "Out of this world!" wrote one reader. "I've been all over the globe," wrote another, "and I've never seen a figure like that before." A college boy asked, "Hey, Dad, is she for *real*?" Our circulation soared and our bank account grew fatter and fatter. So did I. We were living The Good Life.

Jack Regan was as smitten as our readers. He kept joking about driving to the outskirts of town to visit the Babylon. In fact, he joked about it so often I knew he'd really do it sooner or later.

And he did. One evening, a few months after Brown's visit, Jack left the office earlier than usual and showed up the next day about noon. He looked like a 'high school

kid after his first kiss. What's with you?" I asked.

"I was there."

"Where?"

"The Babylon."

"How was it?"

He sighed. "Wonderful."

"Come off it, Jack. You've seen strippers before. I admit those gals are pretty special, but—"

"Special! You don't know the half of it." That sounded good to him so he repeated it. "You don't know the *half* of it!"

"All right, I don't. Tell me the half of it. Tell me all about this fabulous night club."

"In the first place," he said, "it isn't really a night club at all. It's more like a—well, I guess you'd say it was a—well, when you come right down to it, it's a—" He blushed briefly and his voice dropped to a scratchy mutter. "It's a house."

"What do you mean, it's a house? What kind of a h—" Then I got it. "You mean it's a *House*?"

"That's what I said."

I hit the ceiling. "But this is terrible! We've publicized the place for months! We'll be tarred and feathered, ridden out of town on a rail . . . Jack, you're kidding, aren't you? You're pulling my leg, that's it, isn't it? Cut the comedy; it's not really a House, is it?"

He shrugged. "I'm sorry, but I don't know what else you'd call

it." He sighed again. "Those girls—they're wonderful!"

I got angry. "OK. You may not care if I get thrown in jail, but I do. And if *Satyr* folds, so does your meal ticket, Buster. You won't be so willing to throw away money at—"

"Who said anything about money?" he cut in. "It was free."

That did it. I had all I could take of the crazy business. I stormed out and got in my car, pointed it toward the city limits and stepped on the gas. Mr. Brown had a lot of explaining to do.

IT was a simple enough building, but much bigger than I had expected: at least ten stories high. Very distinctive, but not gaudy—with a neon sign over the entrance:

THE BABYLON

House of a Hundred Pleasures

In a little display frame were the pictures from the magazine and an accompanying placard: **YOU'VE SEEN THEM IN SATYR — NOW THRILL TO THEM IN PERSON!**

I was boiling mad. I pushed open the metal door and barged in.

There was nobody around. The place was furnished in suprisingly good taste: ultra modern, nothing corny or rococo. "Hey!" I called. "Anybody home?"

I heard what sounded like a for-eign curse and Brown dashed into

the room. "You!" he cried. "But you cannot stay here. In five minutes we must leave. We cannot be detained."

"Skipping town, eh? Not until you tell me what this is all about . . ."

"There isn't *time*! You must go now!"

"I'm not budging, Brown."

He sighed. "Very well. But it will have to be quick."

"Quick and good. Start talking."

"I was afraid of this. Afraid you would discover what we were doing and object. But I assure you our motives are above reproach . . ."

"Oh, *sure*. Keep talking."

"We had to establish a reputation quickly. Your magazine seemed the best medium of publicity in this locality. And I must say the results have been extremely satisfactory. I know what you're thinking. That we trade in carnality for reasons of gain. You are wrong. We were desperate. Truly desperate. Then we hit upon this idea. We set up places like this not only here but near Paris, London, Moscow, Berlin . . . Photographs were exhibited in publications such as yours."

"But *why*? I know you're not making money out of this. What's the point?"

"The point, my dear sir . . ."
As Brown talked one of the girls

walked through the room. What Brown was saying didn't register because she drew my attention like a magnet and she shot me a side-long look that made me feel like Burt Lancaster.

Brown saw the way I was looking at her, and said. "The young lady would be glad to entertain you, but if we don't leave immediately, we will never get home. Good bye, sir, and thank you for everything." He was pushing me out the door. "Be sure to get well back from the structure, for your own safety."

"But . . . who are you? . . ."

"Who am *I*? Well, you see, our trip will take a good many months and before it's over my services will be urgently required. I'm what you would call an obstetrician. And now please *go*!"

He shoved me outside. My mind was reeling. I climbed in my car and took off up the road. As I drove, I suddenly realized what Brown had been saying when that girl had walked through the room:

"The point, my dear sir, is preservation of the race. Among our people, there are simply not enough men to go around. Now, however, thanks to the cooperation of your males, our women will carry home within them the nucleus of a new generation. We are extremely grateful."

Then a thunderclap deafened

me and the sky seemed lit by a million flares. I looked back. The Babylon was gone, but a bullet-like speck was rising high into the clouds.

Go ahead and laugh. But a little research at the local planetar-

ium the next day gave me a pretty good hunch why "Brown" and his girls were so anxious to leave on time. I'm told it will be years before Earth is again in such perfect conjunction with Mars.

THE END

★ *Electric Automobiles?* ★

TALK to any motor fancier and he'll have you believe that the gas turbine is the automotive power plant of the future. However, events will prove him completely wrong!

Things are happening in electrical engineering which promise that the ubiquitous electric motor will be freed from its bonds of power wires. When that comes, and when electricity can be packaged, a sort of millenia will have arrived.

There are more than a billion electric motors in use in the United States. Silent, durable and ninety percent efficient, they have made manual labor superfluous in most work. They are notably lacking in transportation because where there is an electric motor there must be a set of power lines.

Postulate a package of electricity. Such a portable power supply

would permit the motor to be used anywhere a gasoline engine is used now. Diesels, gas engines, gasoline engines, gas turbines—the lot would go out the window!

Stearonics, the science of semiconductors, the study of crystals, leads scientists to believe that condensers or similar devices can be constructed for storing hundreds of kilowatts of electricity in a small volume and with small mass, not at all comparable to the chemical storage battery.

When you consider how simple an electric motor is, how long it lasts, what powerful torques it can exert, how compactly it can be built and how efficient it is as a device for converting energy from one form to another, it's perfectly apparent how important it will be for future work in motive power.

* * *

You've Been Missing Something

If you haven't been reading our companion magazine, IMAGINATIVE TALES. The May issue (now on sale) features a hilarious novel by Robert Bloch, one of science-fantasy's most popular writers. And so you'll know what to look for, turn to page 131 for a tempting tantalizer!

★ Operational Mathematics ★

In applied science, differential equations arise constantly. These often are quite difficult to solve by conventional methods. By making use of "operational mathematics" (originated by the English electrical engineer, Oliver Heaviside) the most difficult equations reduce to algebraic manipulations.

An amusing aspect of operational mathematics is that it was at first pooh-poo'd by mathematicians as being non-rigorous. Later mathematical work showed that it could

be placed on a firm rigorous basis (as in Laplace Transforms) and now it is used everywhere systematically.

Differential equations, the bugbear of most engineers, using operational mathematics can be reduced to child's play. Describe the motion of an elaborate spring-mass-dashpot system, or analyze a complex electrical network; with Laplace Transforms, you just plug in the problem and the answer pops out—just like a computing machine!



"See a butterfly, eh? What kind?"

Moonlight and Robots

by

Jerry Dunham

Thad hated the silly custom demanding a robot romance. If a man wasn't careful a thing like that could linger on — after the wedding!

THAD Morgan looked around his little room. The two deactivated robots and the framework that suspended the limp suit hardly left room for him to move around. At the moment he felt mildly disgusted with this whole convention.

He asked himself why engagements and marriages had to be surrounded with tradition and ridiculous games. But, of course, he had to go through with it. Myrna seemed to have been filled with excitement when they were discussing the final plans for the ceremony. He might as well get started. He glanced at the clock; it was almost eight. He picked up the book of rules and looked at it again.

He re-read the instructions for operating the mechanism. First,

it said, inspect the facsimile and see that it is well-groomed and entirely in order. He looked at the two lifeless twins of himself. Yes, they looked all right. He decided which one he would use tonight. Then, he read, he was to get into the suit (the book called it a harness), activate the selected facsimile, and set the controls. It went on to say that every movement he made would be duplicated by the robot. Everything the facsimile experienced would be transmitted to the harness becoming his experiences. Well, he had practiced all that since renting the thing three days ago. He turned towards the marriage game rules.

The rules dictated seven situations. That would mean, in his case, seven evenings for Myrna and him to decide whether they

were meeting each other's robots or their real selves.

The book pointed out that the primary or real body had to be used at least once in the first five situations. The first contestant to correctly identify the other's real body won the game and the contest was over. The winner received commendation and was supposed to be the dominant spouse. Of course, the last was mere convention. However, the most important, the most rigid, and to Thad the most fantastic, rule in the whole contest was that if the girl won, the couple was required to wait a year before completing the marriage ceremony. That seemed a weightier matter to Morgan. He read on. The first contestant who correctly identified the other as a facsimile won a point. If he failed, the other contestant had the opportunity to make an identification. The situation ended when one contestant made a correct identification or when both failed. Laying the book down, he decided he'd better get started because it was getting late.

He climbed into the harness and hung in mid-air suspended by his belt. He activated one of his facsimiles and turned his head so he could see himself through the robot's eyes. Thumbing his nose, he watched the creature hanging in the harness do likewise. It gave

him an eerie feeling. Even though he knew he was walking in thin air and getting nowhere, it really seemed as if he could feel the floor under his feet and see the room move around him in a very ordinary fashion. As soon as his facsimile left the room, his mind made the adjustment and it was as if it were really he strolling nonchalantly down the corridor.

He drove to a florist's shop and started to purchase a corsage. Abashed, he caught himself. He rushed out of the shop and went home to put a wallet and handkerchief into his pockets. He would have to be more careful, he realized. Slips like that might cost him the contest.

With corsage box in hand, he pressed the door bell and waited. He hoped his plastic flesh was moulded perfectly. It looked all right to him, but you never could tell what someone else might notice. Myrna opened the door.

SHE was lovely and he took her in his arms. Drawing back, he looked at her dubiously. At least, he thought it was she. His family, her family, and two or three others, acting as judges and referees in the contest, stood in the living room watching them. They began to laugh as they saw his questioning look. It really was rather funny, he decided. Myrna

led him into the room and introduced him to the few he didn't know.

He watched her closely as she opened the box. He thought her fingers were fumbling a bit. Everyone in the room watched the two of them intently. They didn't know whether the couple were real or robot either. At any moment, she might suddenly try to identify him. Maybe he should take the first chance. She might be fumbling from nervousness, he realized. If it were really she and he called her a robot, she might be offended. Girls were like that, but of course, he would have to take that chance.

"You're a robot," he announced suddenly.

Myrna looked surprised. "Oh, how did you know?" She was crestfallen. He was congratulated as they all trooped upstairs to help Myrna out of her harness. Later it was nice to know for sure that it was really her living flesh in his arms. Then he felt guilty as he realized she was not in his living arms. He excused himself hurriedly and returned home.

The next evening he was invited to Myrna's home for dinner. He thought of actually going himself because he knew the food would be good. The apparatus could transmit heat, cold, and pressure, but it didn't do much when it came

to taste and it couldn't make any sensation in one's interior.

But he decided it would be too risky. If she identified his facsimile she would win a point to be sure, but if she identified his real self, well, that would end the contest and he would have to wait a year to get married.

He would have to be careful of the food though. She might try to trick him with something that looked good but tasted terrible, and his facsimile would eat it just the same.

That night before sending his proxy to Myrna's dinner party, he had his facsimile stick himself with a pin. The sharp pain made him wince. He wondered about the mechanics of the machine. He supposed that his pain was caused by a tiny electrical shock that stimulated a pain nerve. He realized that the more he could find out about his equipment the better his chances were of winning.

That evening Myrna was very watchful and very cool. He wondered if she suspected that she had been loved by a robot the evening before. He had hardly seated himself at the table when she called him a robot. The families seemed uproariously amused. He wondered how she had known. He congratulated her politely and she was allowed to go unidentified since it was her round.

When his facsimile was brought back to the room, Thad climbed wearily out of his harness and made himself a cold, uninteresting supper. He felt lonely. Was Myrna really sore at him? Damn this whole business! He wished he didn't have to go through all of this.

THE next evening he had a plan worked out. He went himself and greeted her at the door, slammed it shut, and bent towards her to listen. It would take a moment for the reverberation to reach her room. If she were a robot, the sound would come through the primary microphone in the sender and he might be able to hear the faint echo from her lips. He did, and he immediately announced her as a facsimile. Her congratulations were hardly more than civil.

He left with no great feeling of triumph.

The next three evenings, she was very distant. He understood why she didn't meet him at the door anymore, but he couldn't tell why the rest of her behavior was so cold. She was very lucky, too. She identified him correctly as a robot each time before he even had time to greet the rest of the family. The day went very slowly. Thad left the office early in his uneasiness. Tonight was the seventh and last situation. He hoped it also wouldn't be their last evening to-

gether. At this point, he hardly knew what to do. If she won the contest, it would be a whole long year before they could marry. He knew that quite often that spelled the finish to a romance. On the other hand, if he won, it might estrange them immediately. She had such pride. What to do?

He decided to forget the Robots and go as his real self again. Points were in her favor anyway. He realized that if she were present by facsimile, he couldn't possibly win. He might as well be the first one to guess and be done with it. It wasn't the contest that mattered anyhow; it was Myrna and what she was feeling.

When he rang the doorbell that evening, the corsage box under his arm contained orchids. Unexpectedly, it was Myrna that opened the door.

"Hello, *real* Myrna."

She hesitated for a moment. "Good evening, Thad. Please come in."

He followed her in and greeted the family. She opened the box and for a moment she seemed impressed. Then she regained her composure. He accepted her formal thanks as the families milled around admiring the gift. Everyone seemed slightly restrained. Thad finally phrased the question that they were all thinking.

"Are you real?"

"Perhaps you could tell if you kissed me," she said with mocking sweetness.

"Myrna, I'm sorry about that first evening, but I forgot that I wasn't really there." He wished the family wasn't there so close. All of them watching and listening made him feel an even greater uneasiness. Oh, he thought, the hell with this contest!

"Myrna, honey, look, I don't care if it's really you or not. Well, that is, I mean—."

His voice faded out. He realized he was getting more confused. Someone snickered. Myrna was watching him with a contemptuous smile curving her lips. The whole thing suddenly made him mad.

"O.K! I don't care who wins the contest! I don't care if we do

have to wait a year. I don't even care at the moment if there's going to be a wedding or not."

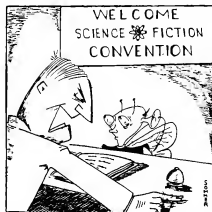
He started out of the room dimly aware that he was angrier than he realized. Myrna caught him in the vestibule.

"Thad! Thad! Wait! Please, I know I was being spiteful. You won the contest, I'm really me. Please don't go like this. I'd never forgive myself."

She looked up at him tearfully. He felt himself relenting finally and smiled. She threw her arms around his neck and he drew her close.

After a very long kiss, she looked up at him and said softly, "Thad, lets be sure the robots are all sent back to the agency before our honeymoon."

THE END



"Martian, Schmartian — you gotta register!"



— REVIEWING CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION BOOKS —

Conducted by Henry Bott

Hard cover science fiction is booming and many fine novels and anthologies are available at all bookstores or by writing direct to the publishers. Each month IMAGINATION will review one or more — candidly — as a guide to your book purchases.

THE BEST SCIENCE FICTION STORIES — 1954

Edited by Everett F. Bleiler and T. E. Dikty, 316 pages, \$3.50. Frederick Fell, Inc. New York, N. Y.

The touchstone of good anthologizing seems to be found in any Bleiler-Dikty opus. This is no exception. First you're given an interesting preface; then follows a generous, interesting essay on science fiction by Fritz Leiber. Primed by these goodies you are offered thirteen excellent and varied stories. Not content with this, the anthology provides biographical sketches of its authors and an index of the "Best. . . ." series of anthologies from '49 through '54.

CRUCIFIXIUS ETIAM by Walter Miller is an absorbing story of pioneering laborers building the new Mars, making of the planet a

civilized world — at the cost of their lives. Realistic, with superb characterization, this story is the best.

For literary virtuosity Alfred Bestor's *TIME IS THE TRAITOR* exceeds the rest. Set a murder story in an incredibly remote future—and make it believable! Since his "Demolished Man" this seems to be Bestor's forte.

A *BAD DAY FOR SALES* by Fritz Leiber, is the third masterpiece, but not the least. It is a savage, biting satire on the near future in which the ubiquitous vending-machine brainlessly purveys its goods in a world disintegrating around it.

This book will make a fine addition to your library.



Conducted by Mari Wolf

When the age of space travel was only a gleam in H. G. Wells' eye, rockets were skyrockets, and comparatively simple things. You wanted to build a rocket—fine; you got your black powder and tamped it into a tube and attached a fuse of some sort; maybe you added ingredients so that it would shoot off red or green trails of smoke or make loud noises or pinwheel at the top of its trajectory. On a suitable holiday—Guy Farkes Day, Bastille Day, the Fourth of July, or the Cinco de Mayo, you mounted your rocket on a stick, lit the fuse, ran away and waited. Your rocket usually did just what it was supposed to do. It went a few hundred feet up in the air very colorfully and very noisily, burned itself out amid a technicolor display and fell back to Earth. You didn't even bother looking for its remains.

Now a spaceship isn't a skyrocket, of course; the comparison isn't valid. But between skyrocket and spaceship lie many intermediate steps, including the guided missile. (Which can hardly be classed as a skyrocket either. Skyrockets in the classical sense didn't carry electronic equipment or guidance systems.) Also, on a less complex level, lie the rockets within reach of the amateur—the rockets built by rocket societies from the early German Rocket Society to the present day.

Your first amateur rockets might have been right out of the pages of the dime novels: Bill Brenschluss, Boy Inventor, and his Blackpowder Missile. A lot of research went into them, of course, but they were comparatively simple. Given some steel tubing, sheet metal for fins, and a supply of black powder, you could build your own rocket. It

wouldn't go very far, a few hundred feet maybe, but it would go off with a big bang and be quite spectacular—and it would be basically just as good as any other rocket being built at that time.

Now, you can still build a black-powder rocket and get the same results, but you know quite well you're building a toy and an insignificant one at that. You know too that unless you're a millionaire or a mad scientist out of a 1930ish science fiction magazine you're not going to accomplish anything in the field of rocketry—not if you approach it with the viewpoint of the backyard inventor.

You can learn a lot about rockets, sure, but along the way you'd better absorb various side lines from chemistry to calculus, not to mention the rudiments of aerodynamics. (If you were living in the future, say a teenager growing up in the Moon colony, you could really have fun with spaceship type rockets. But on Earth, your missiles are going to have to contend with the atmosphere, let's face it.)

Say you join a rocket society like the Pacific Rocket Society. If you wish, you can plunge right into the task of building rockets. The descendants of the inefficient black-powder rockets, micrograin rockets, using a zinc-sulphur mixture as a fuel. They're comparatively easy to build, and cheap. You build one big enough to look impressive—five or six feet long—and you take it up to the Mojave Test Area, put it in the launching tower and fire it.

It's very impressive. It takes off under a high acceleration (it has

to; it's not aerodynamically stable at low speeds and you surely can't afford gyro controls, even if you knew how to build them). It takes off with a lot of smoke and noise, and anyone with a camera is sure to get some very dramatic photos, more impressive in a lot of ways than photos of the slow-takeoff professionally built rockets. It goes up a thousand feet, or two thousand feet; you can track it all the way. It turns over and noses down and picks up speed. Maybe, if you're lucky, somebody has installed a workable parachute recovery device in it and the parachute opens and brings it down safely. More likely, if it was your first rocket, it either has no parachute or the recovery system didn't work, and you find your invention buried nose first in the desert, crumpled up almost beyond recognition, with its fins scattered fifty feet in various directions.

You decide perhaps, to move on to more ambitious models. Now alternatives arise immediately. Do you want a solid rocket, a liquid rocket, or a liquid-solid rocket? Suppose you settled on a liquid rocket. What oxidizer? Liquid oxygen? Then you'll have the problem of keeping your lines and valves unfrozen. Nitric acid? Fine. Do you have face shields, gloves, and a way of transporting the acid—plus people who can handle it?

Fuels? Here you may follow one of the two main courses. You may settle on something the club has used before, something well known and easy to get, and build yourself a conventional rocket, and months later, test and fire it. May-

be it's very successful, maybe it's a dud. It's a cut above the skyrocket class—but you're hardly competing with the various government rockets.

But if you really want to do something with rockets, even in an amateur way, there are a lot of problems you'll have to face. Some of these are purely in the mechanical and chemical nature of the rocket and its fuel: fin type, general configuration and center of pressure, mass ratio, exhaust velocity — all the familiar terms. But the best rocket in the world is still more or less in the skyrocket class as long as it doesn't have some sort of data gathering system. What do you learn if you build a rocket, fuel it, shoot it off with a dramatic bang, and then watch it bury itself in the desert?

You can work on guidance and control—if you've got the money. (Ah, if only the PRS had a few angles, we too could have gyro controls. As it is . . . the rockets go up fast in order to maintain stability aerodynamically, and that's that.) You can work on data gathering apparatus — radio transmitters and receivers, various strain gage pickups, perhaps cameras mounted in the rocket recording the readings on gages measuring fuel consumption, temperatures, barometric pressure, etc. You can work on parachute recovery systems. (Parachute recovery systems are necessary if you want to build an expensive rocket. You want to get it back. Often, though, your parachute works fine in all the cheap little skyrockets you test it in and

then fails miserably when you put it in something you really want to recover.)

The thing is, you get into amateur rocketry because you like rockets, and before you know it you find yourself specializing in any one or several of a dozen fields. You'll probably wind up as part of a team, with one of you working on fuels, another on body design, a couple of others on instrumentation, with perhaps one or two of you or someone else altogether doing the actual machine work.

The day of the individual craftsman, even in something on the amateur level of a rocket club, seems pretty well past. Sure, you can build it yourself in the backyard—but nine times out of ten it won't turn out to be much. Or you can be one of a group and spend months of study and design time, and more months of construction time, and finally come up with something that, if it isn't professional, at least is an efficient machine gathering and transmitting information: something that will be of value to other members of the club.

Of course, if it goes off with a bang and a cloud of smoke, good, bad, or indifferent, it can still help the club in one way. It can be shot off at a public firing to show other people what rockets look like—and since these people pay to look, it can make some money for the club. But that's hardly scientific evaluation.

You can have a lot of fun in an amateur rocket society, and you learn a lot. But it's more than tinkering. It's usually team effort, and a lot of hard work (much of

it spent on building equipment to test equipment to test rockets) that turn out successful projects. No matter what your skills or interests, you'll find scope for them on the team. But you'll specialize, almost invariably. Who doesn't these days?

Even fanzines specialize, but luckily here the process hasn't gone so far. Once, way before science fiction, if you wrote something you might have it printed up into handbills or pamphlets and hawk it yourself, or send it to your friends—now, you can get in on the mass mailing privilege team and do the same thing. You can be one of a group and put out a semi-professional job, or you can get a duplicator or mimeo and do the whole job yourself—and a lot of times you'll do just as well with the one man affair.

It would be nice, in some ways, if you could build your spaceship in your backyard, the same way. Maybe someday you can. But that's a future I can't foresee. Your rocket isn't designed by an artist, but by a hundred or a thousand artisans, and though you may have rugged individualists pioneering other planets, still, their tools and their ships and their lifelines to Earth will be built and maintained by teams.

I wonder if H. G. Wells would be sorry!

Now to this month's fanzines:

* * *

A BAS: Boyd Raeburn, 9 Glenvalley Dr., Toronto 9, Ont., Canada. This is a pay after reading fanzine, so, unless you trade, you're expected to pay what you feel it's

worth. With *A Bas*, this is a problem. Imagine being given the Empire State Building and being asked to pay what you think it's worth.

This issue is worth getting if only for the cover. Raeburn should offer reprints suitable for framing. This cover is by Gary Dutton and Raeburn offers apologies for the poor reproduction. This guy is nuts! I have seen worse reproductions on pro mags.

A Bas seems to be becoming one of the top zines. And yet most fans haven't seen one yet. This is a direct reversal of *Psychotic*. Geis took the standard, almost ideal type zine and made it a winner whereas *A Bas* is written for only those who like it wholeheartedly. The whole zine carries this out. It's put out by the insurgents of a Toronto fanclub and as the editorial states, "Rather a few should bust a gut than the majority be given a faint smile." This is not a pose; they mean it, and do it very well. If you want to test your sense of humor, try *A Bas*.

Rating: 1

* * *

PHOBOS: 5c; Lee Anne Tremper, 1022 N. Tuxedo St., Indianapolis, Indiana. This was formerly IS-FANEWS, and with the confusion resulting from ISFA and EISFA something had to go. The title is the only change however, the format is identical and the cover art still the same, and good.

This is a rather slim zine, mainly since it was (or perhaps still is) the official publication of the ISFA. The material is mostly of interest to Indiana fans but is very well mimeoed and intelligently written.

This issue has a list of *Dell* fantasy and s-f books, a *Popular Library* list, and a complete title list of Lovecraft's work.

J. T. Crackel has a book review column and there is an unsigned fanzine review section.

At five cents, how can you go wrong!

Rating: 3

* * *

ALPHA: 10c; bimonthly; U. S. representative Dick Ellington, 171 St. Marks Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y. Jan Jansen turns out this one and only Belgian fanzine from 229 Berchemlie, Borgerhout, Belgium.

It seems that percentage-wise Belgium has the best fanzines in the world. Alpha is very, very good and consistently improving, and there just aren't any Belgian crudzines (or other zines at all) to stack up against it.

Are you a jazz fan? If so, this is for you—letter after letter this time from jazz enthusiasts and non-enthusiasts responding to a previous issue's article on the subject. (Have you people with *Alpha* corresponded at all with *A Bas*? You should have a lot to exchange, besides fanzines.)

Even if you aren't a jazz fan, or even if you're mainly a traditional jazz fan, you'll still like *Alpha*. It's got everything—fiction, satire, articles, hoaxes, and sections that could be classed equally well under all the above headings.

Rating: 3

* * *

HYPHEN: 2/25c; Walt Willis, 170 Upper Newtownards Rd., Belfast, North Ireland. *Hyphen* is a mimeographed zine running to colored paper,

unjustified margins and a certain amount of overcrowding—and it's one of the best fanzines of this or any other fandom. It lacks the aesthetic quality of its predecessor, *Slant*, but you'll find the writers, the talent, and the humor here.

The cover on this issue shows the inside of a typewriter supply store, and the beanie brigade trying out the duplicators, mimeos, etc., as they assemble their issue, while one clerk says to the other: "It's been four hours now. Do you still think they're going to place an order?"

Damon Knight writes, rather disparagingly, about present day science fiction. There's Irene Gore's Convention report, "Sunday at the Supermancon," a reprint of Gregg Calkin's, "Baby is Fifty," plus Bob Shaw, W. A. W. himself, and the usual crew.

Hardly the zine to uphold the dignity of fandom—merely ten times better.

Rating: 2

* * *

FANTASY-TIMES: 10c; published twice a month; Fandom House, P. O. Box 2331, Paterson 23, New Jersey. The editor-publisher team of James Taurasi and Ray Van Houten have been the newspapermen of the science fiction field for a long time; F-T is well into its fourteenth year. "The World of Tomorrow Today," as it is sub-headed, brings you all the news of the professional and amateur science fiction world, with special emphasis on previewing new magazines, books, and films, as well as coverage of Conventions all over the world.

You'll keep up to date on the

American science-fiction field here—and on the British, Australian, and non-English speaking stf fields as well. It would be a rare thing for a new science fiction publishing house to spring up anywhere, from Japan to Sweden, without Fantasy-Times's being around to announce it.

Rating: 3

* * *

PHANTASMAGORIA: Derek Pickles, 197 Cutler Heights Lane, Bradford 4, Yorks, England. Publisher Pickles and Editor Stan Thomas, also of Yorks, will keep sending this one to you free if you'll write them a letter of comment for each issue received, send material for publication, or trade fanzines. If these alternatives are still too much for you, you can send money.

It's a slim zine, mimeoed, with sketches of fan personalities, Archie Mercer's article on folk music, and Nigel Lindsay's story about a lonesome trolly. Cute, I guess you'd call it. I always like stories about anthropomorphized machinery, especially stories with a slight flavor of innuendo, like this one. I imagine you'll either like it or dislike it thoroughly.

Some good interlineations, including one reprinted from *Time* magazine, yet.

Rating: 5

* * *

DESTINY: 35c; quarterly; 3508 N. Sheffield Ave., Chicago 18, Illinois. Editors Malcolm Willits and Earl Kemp present in this issue the *Destiny Index of Fantasy—1953*, a comprehensive index compiled by Edward Wood. As a reference guide for collectors it should prove

valuable indeed. There are apparently complete listings of all the s-f magazines published during 1953, with a listing, issue by issue, of stories and authors. (So many of these listings are merely, Publication Suspended.)

There is also a listing of s-f books published during 1953—many more than I would have guessed, even taking into account the burgeoning of both hard cover and paperback s-f at this time. And in his "White Paper: 1953-1954" Edward Wood analyzes the state of the field, and gives his criticism of modern day s-f writing.

The issue, over all, is for reference, not for light fannish reading. Format is excellent, as always.

Rating: 5

* * *

KAYMAR TRADER: 10c or 3/25c; monthly; K. Martin Carlson, 1028 Third Ave. So., Moorhead, Minn. The *Trader* functions as the NFFF Trade Bureau, with special subscription and advertising rates to members of the National Fantasy Fan Federation. Advertising rates are low; if you have fantasy or Science fiction material to sell you'll find a waiting market here.

The *Trader* is very much of interest to the science fiction collector. If you're either buying or selling weird, fantasy, or s-f magazines or books, especially old and hard to get items, you'll find this zine most valuable. If you're looking for a fanzine just to read, this one isn't for you—unless you're addicted to reading the Classified sections in the newspaper.

Rating: 3

* * *

SPIRAL: 10c or 3/25c; monthly; Denis Moreen, 214 Ninth St., Wilmette, Ill. Interlineations in Germany yet? *Spiral* becomes with this issue quite a one-man job. Editor Moreen really puts a lot of himself into his zine. For the new fan, a reader trembling on the brink of fandom, this one might not be so good, but if you put out a fanzine you'll want it if only for the extensive review column.

Also, Editor Moreen has made a survey of how fast third-class mail (fanzine type) travels through the United States. His findings: it takes a fanzine about one week, usually, to reach a neighboring state, two weeks to be delivered all the way across the country.

Then too there's the report on the various APA's, or Amateur Press Associations, flourishing in fandom.

Rating: 6

* * *

RHEA: 25c; quarterly; Fred Malz, 38 Seville St., San Francisco 24, Calif. This zine has some good material in it, but 25c is a lot for 20 pages.

Calvin Beck's column, "Microcosmos and Macrocosmos," must be

a joy to write. He rambles from subject to subject, covering everything from the status of new-and-used book dealers to future Convention sites to politics to a plea for stronger unions for white collar workers. All in three pages!

Fred Malz reports disappointment with the Convention opera, made from Ray Bradbury's "A Scent of Sarsaparilla." The only strong dissent I've heard so far.

Ralph Raburn Phillips' cover is, as you might expect, in the weird vein. Bob Steward's back cover features both cheesecake and beefcake—finally a zine catering to the girl reader too. The cover illustrates Reginald Wood's poem, "Danaland."

Then there's the description of that old system of multiplication, here called Ethiopian . . .

Rating: 6

* * *

Well, that's all in the BOX this time. Remember, if you have a fanzine you want reviewed, send it to me, Mari Wolf, *Fandora's Box*, IMAGINATION, P. O. Box 230, Evanston, Illinois. More next issue.

—Mari Wolf

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Letters from the Readers

REVIEWER'S REVIEW . . .

Dear Bill:

As the dispute over Henry Bott's review of Isaac Asimov's novels, *Second Foundation* (June 1954) and *The Caves of Steel* (September 1954) seems to be widening, may I, as a reviewer and reviewee of some experience, get in a word?

Short of breaking the libel laws or giving away the secrets of national defense, a reviewer has a right to say what he likes about the books he reviews. Granted that right, some exercise it more competently than others. A reviewer has a function, just as a writer or an editor has. A fiction writer's function is to entertain. A reviewer's function is to tell the reader those facts about a story that will inform the reader whether he would like to read it. No two reviewers, or for that matter no two readers, agree exactly in taste. Still a reviewer functions well or badly to the extent that he puts readers on the track of stories they like and warns them away from those they

would not.

Now all reviewers (I suppose) have quirks and idiosyncrasies. For instance, I find some popular contemporary sf writers unreadable. If it falls my lot to review such a story, I realize that this is an idiosyncrasy and try to allow for it, by getting someone else to write the review or confiding to the reader that I dislike all works of this kind, or with this particular feature, no matter how well done. If his prejudice agrees with mine, good. If not, he may ignore me.

In the case of the Bott reviews, careful reading shows that Bott did not personally attack or insult Asimov except by a strained and hypersensitive reading of the text. It also shows that Bott was inaccurate (as by saying that *Caves'* "canvas is . . . the galaxy") as well as intemperate and irrational. By this I mean that his strictures were either rhetorical epithets ("heavy-handed . . . ponderous . . . obscure . . . soap-opera . . . furious barrage of words . . . insipid . . . dullness") or complaints against

things not normally deemed faults.

Suppose the canvas of *Caves* had been the galaxy? Many highly-praised stories have done the same. "The murdered Spaceman, a corpse in steel-roofed New York's vastness is remembered by the robot detective and—you fill in from there." What's wrong with robot detectives, steel-roofed New Yorks, or murdered spacemen? It's as if I said: "Glubb's story concerns time travel; all time travel stories stink; ergo, Glubb's story stinks."

Bott's sharpest ire is aroused by Asimov's use of "empires, princesses and kingdoms" in *Second Foundation*, reminding Bott unpleasantly of Graustark. He seems to mean Asimov's use of a future society wherein wealth, status and power are hereditary. So what? This state of affairs has existed for a long time, is not yet extinct, and may flourish again. Does Bott think the brave new world will be ruled by people's democracies, which won't permit such anachronisms? But that drunken bum Vassiliy Stalin did fine while his old man lived.

As for Asimov's books being badly written, more detail is called for. Asimov's use of English is as competent as that of most of his contemporaries. He avoids such tyronic mistakes as giving two characters the same name, or killing a character and forgetfully bringing him to life again. One can dislike well-written fiction (I often do) but a competent reviewer would not give a wrong reason for his dislike.

I conclude that in this case Bott has succumbed to idiosyncrasy and has failed to fulfill his reviewer's

function. In replying in IMAGINATION (circulation in five figures) to Asimov's outburst in PEON (circulation in two or three figures) he has shown himself as sensitive as his target. If Bott had a "right" to publish his original condemnation, Asimov had an equal right to reply. The expediency of his doing so is something else; but then it's his life.

L. Sprague de Camp
Wallingford, Pa.

We've invited Henry Bott to answer you, Sprague, in this same issue. Before we present Henry's letter, we would like to make an observation for the record in regard to your last remarks. It is not a question of Bott's "right" to have published his original condemnation. You are in error. It was not a condemnation—it was a review of Isaac's book(s). It was a statement of a competent critic's opinion. In this respect we wonder why it should be considered Asimov's—or any writer's — "rights" to reply to a critical review. Do they reply to the favorable ones? . . . Huh? . . . As to Bott's reply in our March editorial, we take full credit. Ironically, Isaac could have aired his views publicly in these pages had he so chosen. Madge maintains an open forum at all times. Forthwith, Bott's reply. wkh

Dear Bill:

Thank you for letting me read Sprague de Camp's letter. I hope you won't mind taking a bit of the letter section and including this indirect reply.

I enjoyed de Camp's letter for a particular reason, although I

will take issue with most of what he says in what follows. De Camp, I am happy to see, realizes (contrary to what some other disputants have implied) that no personal bias exits in this discussion—I prefer not to say “controversy”.

For de Camp however, to say that I have failed to fulfill my “reviewer’s function” is absurd. Essentially, according to de Camp, I have merely aired my prejudices, exposed my naïveté of social structure, and have failed to maintain a hypothetical objectivity toward book - reviewing—I have failed to tell the reader “those facts . . . that will inform the reader . . . whether he would like to read it.”

I concede to one—I have aired a prejudice — I dislike Asimov’s books. Would it be advisable for me to preface each review with “I like—or dislike—the following book which I am about to review—read this review with that in mind?” Will not the review make that evident? I find this an untenable conceit and I am sure readers will also.

A future society might very well cherish hereditary status, wealth and power. If it is the writer’s intention to convince me of this let him do so. Asimov did not. Consider some of the patently improvable societies Heinlein has constructed—for the readers those societies were as plausible as our own, so subtly convincing was the author. *SECOND FOUNDATION*’S panoply of royalty is ridiculous.

It is the third point with which I desire to quarrel. Literary criticism—consult Highet, Wilson, Gilbert, for confirmation—is not the cataloguing of a novel. There is an

element of creativeness in so humble an act as writing a short review for a book. To paraphrase the jacket blurb, to outline the plot, to list the characters—this is not book-reviewing. Book-reviewing is a form of literary criticism, and one is allowed the widest possible latitude; I choose often to construct a little essay. It is a personal thing and the reader is rarely in doubt, I think, about precisely how the book has affected me.

No postulates or logical system exist on which I erect a simple analysis. I am not constructing a “Reader’s Guide”, “Plot Outlines and Character Tabulations of Current Science Fiction”, or advertiser’s blurb-sheet.

I think when de Camp attempts to define the critic’s role, he is on rather shaky ground.

Henry Bott

% IMAGINATION

That’s not shaky ground, Hank, it’s a yawning abyss! . . . Reader reaction will necessarily have to wait until next month since March issue comments are only just beginning to come in as this issue goes to press. So for the nonce, on to other matters . . . with

S-F HUNGRY AUSSIE!

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I managed to borrow four issues of *IMAGINATION*—you can’t buy it over here, of course, and have spent the last week prowling around the universe with *Madge* under my arm. I finished reading the last issue with deep sorrow. But stronger than my grief at finishing all available copies of *Madge*, is my

exuberance at the rather belated discovery of a fine magazine. I am so pleased I have to tell someone, and who better than you!

I like your covers and editorials. The novels are excellent; short stories very good; short-shorts either lacking or below par in comparison to the longer stories.

Madge's interior illustrations are much better than most mags, and the cartoons are the finest I've ever seen in a s-f magazine. FAN-DORA'S BOX is far and away better than anything in that line elsewhere. Wonderful!

Your letter section is second only to *Startling's*, which has, I feel, a slight edge. Your back cover interstellar photos are a first-rate idea also, though I would prefer to see them printed in black.

To sum up, IMAGINATION strikes me as a vigorous, well-proportioned, well-produced and friendly magazine with individual touches that make it quite different from any others. Perhaps its most unique property is its capacity for arousing enthusiasm in both readers and editor—it seems to show through.

I wonder, would any of *Madge's* readers be interested in corresponding and/or swapping US science fiction mags for British? Because of currency controls swapping is the only way a sf hungry Aussie can get US sf.

Peter Jefferson
41 Mary St.
Longueville
Sidney, Australia

Thanks for the nice letter, Pete, and we're sure you'll be hearing from a great many American fans and readers. Drop Pete a line, gang,

and send along any sf magazines you can spare with

ALAS, UTOPIA . . .

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I have been so interested in the space station letters in the last few issues that I turn to the letter section first!

I have been backing Sam Johnson and have exchanged several letters with him on the subject. I admire, however, your statement that even though you disagree with him, you defend his right to speak as he thinks. In these worrisome days when accusation is synonymous with guilt, it is well to speak while we can!

In my humble opinion the completion of a space station by any one world power is an improbability. The spy systems of the leading countries are too proficient to permit the keeping of such a large project under security wraps. Even with the meager information released to the public it is evident that the guided missiles of today could knock it down in its first stages.

Also, I have lived long enough to see and hear the rise and fall of hatreds over a period of more years than I care to think about. We've had the hysteria of two major world conflicts. We hated the Germans and then returned to affection for them twice. I remember when our now loving Italians were dirty fascists; I worked in a machine shop under Russian inspectors when they were the salt of the Earth. I have seen and heard people laugh and applaud at a film

showing Japs being burned out of caves with flame throwers. I have heard the condemnation of negroes and seen the sidelong glances of hatred from negroes in the South. With these things and many others in mind, I cannot help but wonder where the people might be who have the integrity to control a space station . . .

Charles Athey
1995 Dixie Highway
Hamilton, Ohio

All of us are cognizant of the irony of political alliances, Chuck. And equally, we recognize that no true social utopia exists in this world—as yet, at any rate. At the same time, to answer your query, any Western nation — of which America is certainly the bulwark — has more to offer humanity in its attempt to reach that nebulous utopia; therefore it seems logical to us that we should foster a space station. Certainly someone will soon — technological progress moves at a rapid pace these days and our society will have to keep pace . . . wh

LETTERS WORTH THE PRICE!

Dear Bill:

In the February issue it seems the Canadian contributors to the letter column are definitely resentful against the United States being the nation to set a space station spinning. It even looks like they're pretty sure that we'll lose in getting it up there.

Hugh MacKinnan looks to me like one of these ardent nationalistic kind of guys. He claims that "more idealistic" countries like Britian, Canada, and Australia will provide

such stiff competition that they will probably beat us out in the space station race. (He discreetly omits Russia which is more powerful than all three of these countries lumped together.)

The actual facts are simple: Canada and Australia simply do not rate as world powers and most likely won't for quite a while yet. Britian, on the other hand, might very well be a capable power in the project. If, however, it was a nation-for-nation race I think the USA would emerge on top. Why? Because it's still more powerful. On this logic anyone can compute the odds on the United Kingdom beating the world into space. I don't mind MacKinnan being nationalistic—that's his right and privilege; but I do mind like hell when his nationalism runs over and he starts indiscriminately criticizing the United States.

The rest of the February issue was great. Leading off was another excellent cover — this time Dick Loehle who I have never heard of before and who I hope to hear of again. The past three covers have been fabulous. I'm glad to see newcomer Loehle supporting the tradition.

Fiction was good, as were the cartoons. Features were generally the same. Only one objection here — the Book Review section was markedly stunted in length. I know you've been getting some complaints on Bott's critiques, however, cutting the size of the feature is only going to draw other complaints!

All in all, tabulating the verdicts, *Madge* is a darn good magazine with a darn good letter column. You've

heard it before, but I'll repeat it anyway—the letters are worth the price of the magazine alone . . .

Warren F. Link
1123 Cumberland Road
Abington, Pa.

One thing about our letter department, Warren, there's never a dull moment! And we really wouldn't want it any other way . . . with

NO PREJUDICE IN STF!

Dear Bill:

When I received the February issue of *Madge* I was very pleasantly surprised to see that the back cover photos have returned, and also that *Introducing the Author* has also been reinstated. As to the stories, every one in the issue was fine, including the novel.

The reason for this letter, however, is not to merely praise *Madge*, but to suggest that we leave off the discussion of who should control the first space station. Of course, being an American I believe that the USA should control the first of the stations because I believe that we above all others can be trusted with the power which might tempt others to become rulers of the earth.

After reading the letters from our friends from Canada, I realize that they feel exactly the same as we do. They are loyal to their country as we are to ours. They have the same faith in their country's integrity as we have in ours. Let's not make *Madge's* letter column a battleground where s-f fans fight tooth and nail and spout unfair prejudices against one another.

We must realize that IMAGINATION is a science fiction magazine, not a political journal. Since it deals with science and the fiction similarly, why not be old-fashioned and go back to discussing these? At least we could become friends again and not be at each other's throat continually.

One of the main reasons I became an s-f fan was that a man of earth was never referred to as an alien; this term was only applicable to beings from other planets. I thought this was an indication that SF fans in general were not prejudiced against one another because they lived in other countries. I don't like to see letters filled with prejudice in *Madge*. Prejudice has no place in science fiction!

Richard Santelli
3525 S. 53rd Ave.
Cicero 50, Ill.

Whoa, there Dick. There's no animosity of a serious nature in any Madge discussion; sure the gang gets its dauder up on some subjects, but heck, we've never attended a debate or forum where all was sweetness and light. There is much to be learned from controversial viewpoints, and that goes for both sides of any discussion. We do, of course, agree with you that prejudice has no place in science fiction, and we'd be the last ones to foster any. The same, we're sure, holds true for all of our readers, and they number many, many thousands. As to discontinuing the space station discussion, we don't feel that would be serving the useful purpose you suggest. Aside from the aspect of prejudice hinted at in the heat of discussion, the fact re-

mains that a space station is an important subject these days. Our civilization is on the brink of its greatest advance, and that is space travel. A space station may well be the first step in accomplishing the epochal event. Sure it may seem trivial to argue control—but at the same time we cannot dodge the fact that Iron Curtain science is pointed in that direction; it behooves us to get off our complacent fannies and do something about it ourselves. And continued discus-

sion is one way of helping reach the goal in an active sense. . . . Which about winds up shop for this month, gang. Don't forget to pick up the May issue of our companion magazine, **IMAGINATIVE TALES**. You'll find the institution of reader departments in the May issue, not to mention a couple of top-notch stories by Robert Bloch and Daniel F. Galouye. There's a reproduction of the cover on page 131 of this issue of *Madge*. See you next month. . . . wh

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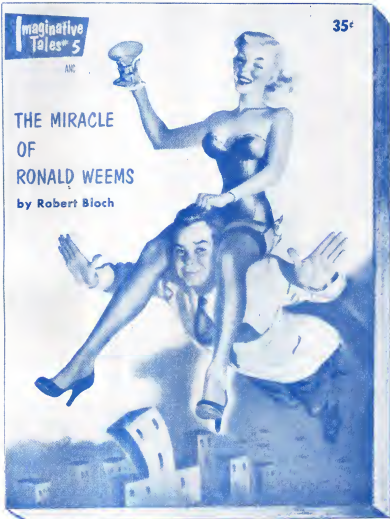
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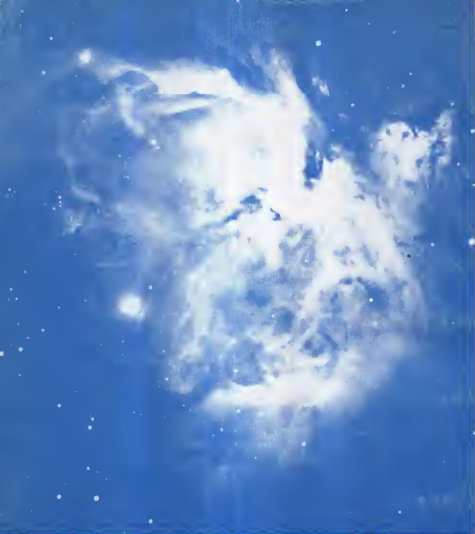
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Another scan
by
cape1736

